PDC 583709

THE MAGAZIN

Fantasy AN

Science Fiction

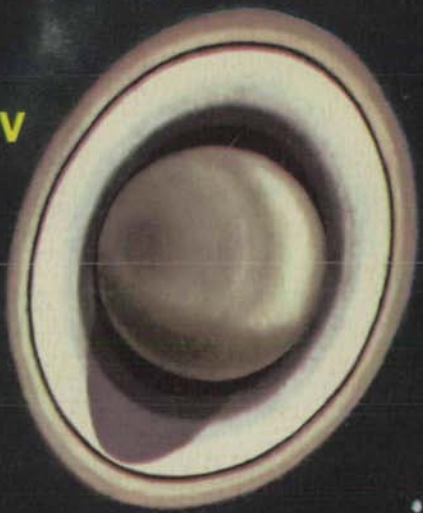
16 extra pages
22nd Anniversary
ALL-STAR ISSUE

NOVEMBER

75c • UK 30p.

A MERCURY PUBLICATION

Poul & Karen Anderson
Philip José Farmer
Lloyd Biggle, Jr.
Zenna Henderson
Robert Aickman
Fritz Leiber
Isaac Asimov



Chesley Bonestell

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fantasy and Science Fiction

Including Venture Science Fiction

NOVEMBER • 23RD YEAR OF PUBLICATION

NOVELETS

Bind Your Hair	ROBERT AICKMAN	24
That Boy	ZENNA HENDERSON	111

SHORT STORIES

A Feast For The Gods	POUL and KAREN ANDERSON	4
Only Who Can Make A Tree?	PHILIP JOSE FARMER	46
Whom The Gods Love	LLOYD BIGGLE, JR.	56
The Price Of Pain Ease	FRITZ LEIBER	73
How We Pass The Time In Hell	GARY JENNINGS	89

FEATURES

Books	JOANNA RUSS	18
Cartoon	GAHAN WILSON	45
Films	BAIRD SEARLES	71
Science: The Left Hand Of The Electron	ISAAC ASIMOV	101
F&SF Competition		144

Cover by Chesley Bonestell (see page 17)

Edward L. Ferman, EDITOR & PUBLISHER Isaac Asimov, SCIENCE EDITOR

Andrew Porter, ASSISTANT EDITOR Dale Beardale, CIRCULATION MANAGER

Joseph W. Ferman, CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NO: 51-25682

The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Volume 41, No. 5, Whole No. 246, Nov. 1971. Published monthly by Mercury Press, Inc. at 75¢ a copy. Annual subscription $8.50; $9.00 in Canada and Mexico, $9.50 in other foreign countries. Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy and Science Fiction, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Publication office, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Editorial submissions should be sent to 347 East 53rd St., New York, N. Y. 10022. Second class postage paid at Cornwall, Conn. 06753 and at additional mailing offices.

Printed in U. S. A. Copyright © 1971 by Mercury Press, Inc. All rights, including translations into other languages, reserved. Submissions must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes. The publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Poul Anderson's first appearance since the enthusiastically received special Anderson issue (April 1971) is a collaboration with his talented wife, and the result is so thoroughly enjoyable that we think you'll look forward to seeing more stories under both by-lines. The story is about a young, attractive computer programmer named Vanessa Talbot, her relationship with a Greek god (the Olympian, not muscle beach type) and what happens when he decides to do some checking into contemporary divinities.

A Feast For The Gods

by Poul and Karen Anderson

A STRONG, LOUD WIND DROVE grizzly clouds low above Oceanus. The waves that rumbled before it were night-purple in their troughs, wolf-gray on their crests, and the foam lacing them blew off in a salt mist of spindrift. But where Hermes hurried was a radiance like sunlight.

Otherwise the god willed himself invisible to mortals. This required him to skim the water, though damp and the gloom of a boreal autumn were not to his liking. He had started at a sunny altitude but descended after his third near collision with an aircraft.

I should have inquired beforehand, he thought, and then: *Of whom? Nobody lives in this islandless waste. —Well, someone could have told me, someone whose worshipers still ply the seas.*

Or I should have reasoned it out for myself, he continued, chagrined since he was supposed to be the cleverest of the Olympians. *After all, we see enough flyers elsewhere, and hear and smell them. It stands to reason mortals would use them on this route.*

But so many!

The ships, too, had multiplied. They were akin to those engine-driven vessels which Hermes often observed on the Midworld. He sighed for the white-winged statelinesses of the last time he passed this way, two centuries ago.

However, he was not unduly sentimental. Unlike most gods, including several in his own pantheon, he rather enjoyed the ingenuity of latter-day artisans. If only they were a bit less productive.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

They had about covered the earth with their machines and their children; they were well along toward doing likewise for the great deep, and the firmament was getting cluttered.

Eras change, eras change. And you'd better check on how they've been changing in these parts, my lad. Hermes tuned his attention to the radio spectrum and caught the voice of an English-speaking military pilot. "–Roger." For a moment he was jolted. Two centuries ago, no gentleman would have said that where any lady might be listening. Then he recalled hearing the modern usage in the Old World.

We really should have been paying closer attention to mortal affairs. Especially in the New World. Sheer laxity to ignore half the globe this long a while.

Immortals got hidebound, he reflected. And once humans stopped worshiping them, they got–might as well be blunt–lazy. The Olympians had done little in Europe since the Renaissance, nothing in America since the birth of Thomas Jefferson. The fact that they had never been served by the American people, and thus had no particular tradition of interest in the affairs of that folk, was no excuse.

Certainly Hermes, the Wayfarer, ought to have paid frequent visits. But at least he was the one who had discovered the need for an investigation.

A prayer, startling him to alertness. . .and in that heightened state, the sudden faint sense of something else, of a newborn god. . . .

He peered ahead. At his speed, the western horizon had begun to show a dark line which betokened land. The wings on his helmet and sandals beat strongly. Men aboard a coastwise freighter thought they glimpsed a small cyclone race by, yelling, kicking up chop and froth, lit by one brass-colored sunset ray.

Yet, despite his haste, Hermes traveled with less than his olden blitheness. If nothing else, he was hungry.

Vanessa Talbott had not called on Aphrodite that Saturday because she was a devotee. In fact, earlier she had invoked the devil. To be precise, she had clenched her fists and muttered, "Oh, hell damn everything, anyway," after she overcame her weeping.

That was when she said aloud, "I won't cry any more. He isn't worth crying over."

She took a turn about the apartment. It pressed on her with sights hard to endure–the heaped-up books she and Roy had read and talked about; a picture he had taken one day when they went sailing and later enlarged and framed; a dust-free spot by the south window, where the dropcloth used to lie beneath his easel; her guitar, which she would play for him while she sang, giving him music to accompany his work; the bed they'd bought at the Goodwill–

"Th-th-the trouble is," Vanny

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

admitted, "he is worth it. Damn him."

She wanted wildly to get out. Only where? What for? Not to some easily found party among his friends (who had never quite become hers). They had too little idea of privacy, even the privacy of the heart. Nor, on some excuse, to the home of one of her friends (who had never quite become his). They were too reserved, too shyly intent on minding their own business. So? Out at random, through banging city streets, to end with a movie or, worse, smoke and boom-boom and wheedling strangers in a bar?

Stay put, girl, she told herself. *Use the weekend to get rested. Make a cheerful, impenetrable face ready for Monday.*

She'd announced her engagement to Roy Elkins, promising young landscape and portrait painter, at the office last month. The congratulations had doubled her pleasure. They were nice people at the computer center. It would be hard to tell them that the wedding was off. Thank God, she'd never said she and Roy were already living together! That had been mainly to avoid her parents getting word in Iowa. They were dears, but they wouldn't have understood. *I'm not sure I do either. Roy was the first, the first. He was going to be the last. Now—Yeah, I'm lucky. It'd have hurt too much to let them know how much I hurt.*

The place was hot and stuffy. She pushed a window open. Westering sunlight fell pale on brick walls opposite. Traffic was light in this area at this hour, but the city grumbled everywhere around. She leaned out and inhaled a few breaths. They were chill, moist, and smog-acrid. *Soon's we'd saved enough money, I'd quit my job and we'd buy an old Connecticut farmhouse and fix it ourselves—* "Oh, hell damn everything, anyway."

How about a drink? Ought to be some bourbon left.

Vanny grimaced. Her father's cautions against drinking alone, or ever drinking much, had stayed with her more firmly than his Lutheran faith and Republican politics. The fact that Roy seldom touched hard liquor had reinforced them.

Of course, our stash.... She hesitated, then shrugged. Her father had never warned her about solitary turning on.

The smoke soothed. She wasn't a head. Nor was Roy. They'd share a stick maybe once or twice a week, after he convinced her that the prohibition was silly and she learned she could hold her reaction down to the mild glow, which was the most she wanted. This time she went a little further, got a little high, all by herself in an old armchair.

Her glance wandered. Among objects which cluttered the mantel was a miniature Aphrodite of Milos. She and Roy had both fallen in love with the original before they met each other. He said that was the softest back in the world; she spoke of the peace in that face, a happiness too deep for laughter.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Dizziness passed through her. She lifted her hands. "Aphrodite," she begged, "help. Bring him home to me."

Afterward she realized that her appeal had been completely sincere. *Won't do, girl,* she decided. *Next would come the nice men in white coats.* She extinguished and stored the joint, sought the kitchen, scrambled a dish of eggs—chopping a scallion and measuring out turmeric for them was helpful to her—and brewed a pot of tea: Lapsang Soochong, that is, hot, red, and tarry-tasting. Meanwhile an early fall dusk blew in from the sea.

Sobered, she noticed how cold the place had gotten. She took her cup and saucer and went to close the living room window she had left open. The only light streamed out of the kitchen behind her.

That illuminated the god who flew in between her drapes.

Hermes whipped his caduceus forward. "Halt!" he commanded. The small bowl and plate which the young woman had dropped came to a midair stop. The liquid which had splashed from them returned. Hermes guided them gently to a table. She didn't notice.

He smiled at her. "Rejoice," he said in his best English. "Be not afeared. No harm shall befall you, mademoiselle, damme if 'twill."

She was good to look upon, tall, well-curved, golden-haired, blue-eyed, fresh-featured. He was glad to see that the brief modern modes he had observed on mortal females elsewhere had reached America. However, Yahweh's nudity taboo (how full of crotchets the old fellow was!) kept sufficient effect that he had been wise to will a tunic upon his own form.

"Who. . .what—?" The girl backed from him till a wall blocked her. She breathed hard. This was interesting to watch, but Hermes wanted to dispel the distress behind the bosom.

"I beg pardon for liberties taken," he said, bowing. His helmet fluttered wings to tip itself. "Under the circumstances, d'ye see, mademoiselle, discretion appeared advisable. 'Twould never do to compromise a lady; bless me, no. My intention is naught but to proffer assistance. Pray be of cheer."

She straightened and met his gaze squarely. He liked that. Broadening his smile, he let her examine him inch by inch. He liked that too. The lasses always found him a winsome lad; the ancient Hellenes had portrayed him accurately, even, given certain moods, in the Hermae.

"Okay," she said at last, slowly, shaken underneath but with returned poise. "What's the gag, Mercury, and how did you do your stunt? A third-floor window and no fire escape beneath."

"I am not precisely Mercurius, mademoiselle. You must know Olympian Hermes. You invoked the Lady, did you not?" He saluted Aphrodite's eidolon.

She edged toward the hall door. "What do you mean?" Her tone

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pretended composure, but he understood that she believed she was humoring a madman till she could escape.

"You sent her the first honest prayer given an Olympian in, lo, these many centuries," he explained, "albeit 'twas I, the messenger, who heard and came, as is my function."

The doorknob in her hand gave confidence. "Come off it, Charlie. Why should gods pay attention, if they exist? They sure haven't answered a lot of people who've needed help a lot worse."

She has sense, Hermes thought. *I shall have to be frank.* "Well, mademoiselle, peculiar circumstances do ensphere you, linkage to a mystery puissant and awful. That joined your religious probity in drawing me hither. Belike the gods have need of you."

She half opened the door. "Go quietly," she said. "Or I run out hollering for the police."

"By your leave," Hermes replied, "a demonstration."

Suddenly he glowed, a nacreous radiance that filled the twilit room, a smell of incense and a twitter of pipes through its bleakness. Green boughs sprouted from a wooden table. Hermes rose toward the ceiling.

After a silent minute, the girl closed the door. "I'm not in some kind of dream," she said wonderingly. "I can tick off too many details, I can think too well. Okay, god or Martian or whatever you are, come on down and let's talk."

He declined her offer of refreshment, though hunger gnawed in him. "My kind lacks not for mortal food."

"What, then?" She sat in a chair opposite his, almost at ease now. The blinds drawn, ordinary electric bulbs lit, he might have been any visitor except for his costume. . .and yes, classic countenance, curly hair, supple body. . . . How brilliant those gray eyes were!

"Tell me first your own grief." As he gained practice in contemporary speech, the music came back to his tones. "You begged the Lady to restore your lover to you. What has borne him off?"

She spread her hands. "I'm square," she said bitterly.

Hermes cocked his head. "I'd call you anything but," he laughed. Quicksilver fast, he turned sympathetic again. " 'Twas a—You found yourselves too unlike?"

"Uh-huh. We loved each other but we bugged each other."

"Fleas?" His glance disapproved of the untidiness around.

"Annoyed. For instance, he hated my trying to keep this apartment in order—hen-fuss, he called it—and I hated the way he'd litter stuff around and yell when I so much as dusted the books. I wanted him to take better care of the money; you wouldn't believe how much went down the drain, and our hopes with it. He wanted me to stop pestering him about such trifles when he was struggling to make a picture come out right." Vanny sighed. "The breakup was yesterday. He'd gone to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a party last week that I couldn't make because of working late. I learned he'd ended in bed with another girl. When I. . .taxed him, he said why not and I was free to do likewise. I couldn't see that. The fight got worse and worse till he yelled he'd be damned if he'd anchor himself like a barnacle. He collected his gear and left."

Hermes arched his brows. "Mes-eems–seems to me you were pretty unreasonable. What's it to you if he has an occasional romp? Penelope never jawed Odysseus after he got back."

Some of her calm deserted her. "The name's Vanessa, not Penelope. And–and if he doesn't think any more of *me* than to not care if I–" She squeezed her lids shut.

Hermes waited. His mission was too urgent for haste. The snakes on his caduceus did twitch a bit.

At length she met his gaze and said, "All right. Let's have your story. Why're you here? You mentioned food."

He thought she showed scant respect, especially for one whose whole universe had been upset by the fact of his existence. However, she was not really a worshiper of the Olympians. The sincerity of her appeal to Aphrodite had come in a moment of intoxication. And he had had to admit that all pantheons shared reality. Unless she comprehended that, she probably couldn't help him. Therefore, this being more or less Jesus territory, why should she fall on her knees?

Or was it? Stronger than before, he sensed a new divinity brooding over the land, to which she had some tie. Young, but already immense, altogether enigmatic, the being must be approached with caution. The very mention of it had better be led up to most gradually.

"Well, yes," Hermes said. "We do lack proper nourishment."

Vanny considered him. "You don't look starved."

"I spoke of nourishment, not fuel," he snapped. Now that he had been reminded of it, his emptiness made him irritable. "Listen, you could keep going through life on, uh, steak, potatoes, string beans, milk, and orange juice. Right? But suppose you got absolutely nothing else ever. Steak, potatoes, string beans, milk, and orange juice for breakfast, for lunch, for supper, for a bedtime snack and a birthday treat, year after year, decade after decade, steak, potatoes, string beans, milk, and orange juice. Wouldn't you cross the world on foot and offer your left arm for a chance at a plate of chop suey?"

Her eyes widened. "Oh," she breathed.

"Oh, indeed," Hermes snorted. "I can hardly say 'nectar and ambrosia' without gagging."

"But–a whole planet–"

"Mortal food has no appeal. Not after celestial." Hermes curbed his temper. "Let's continue the analogy. A bowl of unsalted oatmeal wouldn't really break the monotony of steak,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

potatoes–Never mind." He paused. "Suppose you finally got access, in addition, to...chop suey, I said... okay, we'll add roast duck, trout, borscht, ice cream, apples, and farofa. That'd be good at first. Given another ten or twenty years, though, wouldn't you again be so bored that you could barely push down enough food to stay alive?

"Next consider that the gods are immortal. Think in terms of thousands of years." Hermes shuddered.

Presently he added, quieter: "That's the basic reason we gave up the burnt offerings you read about in Homer. We passed word on to our priests that these were no longer welcome in a more civilized milieu. That was partly true, of course. We'd cultivated our palates, after we ran into older sets of gods who sneered behind their hands at our barbarous habits. But mainly...during a millennium, thighbones wrapped in fat and cast on the flames grew bloody tedious.

"Nectar and ambrosia were fine to begin with. But in the end–well, maybe it amused Athene and Apollo a while longer than the rest of us, to play one-upmanship about differences in vintage or seasoning that nobody else could detect; or maybe they were just putting up a front. Ares and Hephaestus had long since been sneaking off to Yahweh for a whiff of *his* burnt offerings."

Hermes brightened a little. "Then I got an idea," he said. "That was when Poseidon came home from Egypt raving about the beer Isis had opened for him." *I don't think that was all she opened; gods get jaded in many different ways.* "Me, I'd never cared for Egyptian cuisine. But it occurred to me, the world is wide and full of pantheons. Why not launch systematic explorations?"

"Oh, my," Vanny whispered. "You did? Like, smorgasbord in Valhalla?"

"Actually," Hermes said, "Odin was serving pork and mead at the time. His kitchen's improved some since. Ah, in China, though–the table set by the Jade Emperor–!"

For a minute he was lost in reminiscence. Then he sagged. "That also got predictable," he mumbled. "After the thousandth dish of won ton, no matter how you swap the sauces around, what good is the thousand and first?"

"I suppose," she ventured, "I suppose the foreign gods visit you?"

"Yes, yes. Naturally...I mean supernaturally. Makes for occasional problems. The Old Woman of the Sea thinks manners require a thunderous belch at the end of the meal; and that boarding house reach of Krishna's–And the newer gods, especially, are hard to please, picky, you know. Not that we Olympians don't draw the line here and there."

While his unhappiness was genuine as he called it to mind, Hermes was not unaware of sympathy in those blue eyes, upon those soft lips. "The custom's dying out," he let gust wearily from him. "They're as tired of the same over and over at our

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

table as we are at theirs. I haven't seen some of them—Why, come to think of it, I haven't seen good old Marduk for fifteen hundred years."

"How about the Western Hemisphere?" Vanny suggested. "For instance, have you ever been to an old-fashioned American church supper?"

Hermes started half out of his seat. "What?" he cried.

She in her turn was astonished. "Why, the food can be delicious. When I was a little girl in Iowa—"

Hermes rose. Sweat glowed red on his brow. "I didn't realize you were that kind of person," he clipped. "Good-*by*."

"What's the matter?" She sprang to her own feet and plucked at his sleeve. "Please."

"I've been to an old-fashioned American church supper," he said grimly. "I didn't stay."

"But—but—"

Seeing her bewilderment, he checked himself. "Could there be a misunderstanding?" he inquired. "This was about five centuries ago. I can't wrap my tongue around the god's name. Whitsly-Putsly—something like that."

"Oh," she said. "Aztec."

Discourse got straightened out. "No Olympian has visited hereabouts at all for a long time," Hermes explained. "We knew it'd become Jesus and Yahweh country, except for a few enclaves, and saw no reason to bother, since we can find that closer to home. And as for those enclaves, well, yes, we used to drop in on persons like Coyote, so we know about maize and pumpkins and succotash and whatnot."

In the course of this, he had taken her hands in his. They were warm. He aimed a brave smile down at her. "Believe me, we've tried everywhere," he said. "We still carry on, however futilely. Like the past week for me. I'm the Wayfarer, you know; I get around more than my kinfolk. Call it gadding if you want, it helps pass the centuries and helps maintain friendly relations between the pantheons.

"I left Olympus for Mount Athos, where I ascended to the Christian Paradise. St. Francis gave me bread and wine. He's a decent little chap, though I do wish he'd bathe oftener. Next evening I called on Yahweh and shared his kosher altar. (He has a few devotees left in the Near Eastern hills who sacrifice in the ancient way. Mostly, though, gods prefer ethereal food as they grow older and more sophisticated.) Next day I had business 'way north, and ended up at Aegir's board on the bottom of the Baltic—lutefisk and akvavit. Frankly, that gave me a hangover; so I ducked south again, sunned myself in Arabia, and spent that night with Mohammed, who doesn't drink." He forebore to mention what hospitality was otherwise offered. "After that, yesterday, it was out across Oceanus for a night in Tir-nan-Og, where the Sidhe cooked me a rasher of bacon and honestly believed they were giving me a treat. That's where I heard rumors of a new god in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

America. When your prayer blew by on the west wind, it tipped the scales and I decided to come investigate. But I've had no bite or sup today, and hungry and discouraged I am."

"It seems utterly wonderful to me," she murmured. "And to you, nothing you haven't experienced till you're tired to the death you can't have?"

"Yes," he sighed artistically. "Monkday, Jewsday, Wettestday, Thirstday, Fryday, Sadderday, and what else is new?"

But the fact of his mission shouldered aside the fact of her nearness. He released her, stepped back, stared out the window at leaping neon and headlights which passed in a whirr. The sense of a Presence possibly destined to mold the world to yet another shape waxed until a tingle went through his ichor.

"Well, something *is* new," he said low. "Something arising in so few years that we immortals are caught by surprise. It's no coincidence your prayer was answered. I heard and heeded because I could feel that you, Vanessa, are. . .with it?"

Turning to confront her once more: "What are you? You've only spoken of yourself as a woman deserted and sorrowing. What else are you? Sibyl? Priestess? Who do you serve?"

"Whom," his memory scolded. *The English accusative is "whom." Confound that Seaxnot and the way he used to keep handing his people more and more complicated visions about their grammar. –Ah, well, Anglo-Saxon gods also grow bored and need hobbies.*

The tension heightened. *But I have found a mystery.*

"N-nobody," the girl stammered. "I told you before, I don't go to church or, or anything."

Hermes gripped her shoulders. *God, he's a handsome devil,* she thought. *No, I mean, devil, he's a handsome god.* Roy–crossed her mind, but briefly. This fantastic hour had dazzled the pain out of her.

"I tell you, I know differently." Hermes paused. "European women often have jobs these days. Do you?" She nodded. "Who's your master. . . whom do you work for?"

"The Data Process Company." Her words gathered speed as she saw his attention gather intensity. "A computer center. We contract out our services. Not that we keep much in-house hardware, mainly an IBM 1620 and a 360. But we have time on as many computers elsewhere, of as many different types, as necessary. We make it cheaper for outfits to bring their problems to us than to maintain staff and facilities of their own. I guess you could say we're near the heart of the whole national computer-communications complex. But really, Hermes, I'm only a little routineering programmer."

"You're the servant who happened to call on an Olympian," he replied. "Now suppose you tell me what the Hades you're talking about."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

This took a while. Nevertheless she appreciated the quick intelligence with which he seized on new concepts, and she enjoyed the aliveness of curiosity that played across his features. *Like the muscles under that brown skin when he cat-paces.* Finally, slowly, Hermes nodded.

"Yes," he said. "This will indeed change the world, as Jesus did before, or Amon-Ra before him, or Oannes before him." He tugged his chin and his gaze was remote. "Yes-s-s. Surely you have a god here. Very young as yet, hardly aware of his own existence, let alone his powers; withal, a god.... It's well, Vanessa, it's well I stumbled onto the fact this early. Else we might not have noticed till—too late—"

Abruptly he laughed. "But magnificent!" he whooped. "Take me there, girl! Now!"

"You can't be serious," she protested. "A divine computer?"

"Trees, rivers, stones, beasts have become gods. Not to speak of men, even in their own lifetimes." Hermes drew breath. "A formal church isn't required. What counts is the *attitude* of men toward the...toward that which thereby becomes numinous. Awe leads to sacrifice, under one name or another; outright worship follows; then theology; then at last men grow weary of the god and take their business elsewhere, and he can retire. Always, however, the godhood comes before the cult and remains afterward. I, for example, began as a night wind and worked my way up."

Less arguing than grabbing after enlightenment, she said, "This can't be a single computer. Look, no computer is more than a glorified adding machine. You must be referring to the whole network of...not simply machines but their interlinks, data banks, systems, processes, concepts, interaction with mankind. Aren't you?"

"Of course."

"Isn't that terribly abstract?"

"Sure. But an abstraction can become a god too. Like, say—" Hermes grinned—"Eros, who continues rather influential, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"You w-want to meet the, the new one?"

"Yes. Right away if possible. Partly to study his nature. They'll need forewarning in the assorted heavens." Hermes hesitated. "Including Paradise? I wonder. Gods who retain congregations should've paid closer attention to developments. Maybe they did, but for their own purposes haven't elected to tell us." His lips quirked in wry acceptance of realpolitik before his mood shifted into merriment. "Partly, also, I have to learn what this fellow eats!"

"What can an abstraction eat?" Vanny wondered dazedly.

"Well, Eros likes the same as the rest of us," Hermes told her. "On the other hand, the newest god I've met thus far prefers abstractions in spite of being still a living man. I tried the stuff he produces but didn't care for it." She signified puzzlement. "Oh, Chairman Mao does have food for

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thought," he said, "but an hour later you're hungry again." Abruptly, in the ardor of his eternal youthfulness: "C'mon, let's go. Take me to your Oh good gawd! creeder."

Her heart fluttered like the wings on his heels. "Well, the place would be deserted except for a watchman. Locked, though."

"No perspiration. Guide me."

"I don't have a car. When Roy and I—We used his."

"You were expecting maybe Phoebus Apollo?" He swept her up in his arms.

As in a dream, she let him bear her out a window that opened anew at his command: out into the air, high over that delirium of light which was the city. Warmth enfolded her, sound of harps, birdsong, soughing leaves and tumbling cataracts. She scarcely heard herself steer him along the jewel-map of streets, above skyscrapers dwindled to exquisiteness. She was too aware of the silky-hard breast against which she lay, the pulsebeat strong behind.

With an exultant hawk-shout, he arrowed down upon the immense cubicle where she worked. Another window flew wide. Old Jake yawned, settled on a bench, and slumbered. In the cold white light of an echoful anteroom, Hermes released Vanessa. He brushed a kiss across her mouth. Turning, wings aquiver on high-borne head, caduceus held like a banner staff, he trod into the computer section and vanished from her sight.

Hermes, Wayfarer, Messenger, Thief, Psychopompus, Father of Magic, Maker of the Lyre, stood amidst strangeness.

Never had he been more remote from wine-dark seas, sun-bright mountains, and the little houses and olive groves of men. Not in the depths of the Underworld, nor the rustling mysterious branches of Yggdrasil, drowned coral palace of shark-toothed Nan, monster-haunted caverns of Xibalba, infinite intricate rooms-within-rooms where dwelt the Jade Emperor, storms and stars and immensities commanded by Yahweh . . . nowhere, nowhen had he met an eeriness like that which encompassed him; and he knew that the world in truth stood on the rim of a new age, or of an abyss.

N-dimensional space flickered with mathematical waves. Energies pulsed and sang on no scale heard before by immortal ears. The real was only probably real, a nexus in endlessly expanding diffractions of the could-be; yet through it beat an unmercifully sharp counting, naught, one, one-naught, one-one, one-naught-naught, one-naught-one; and from this starkness there spiraled the beauty and variousness of all the snowflakes that will ever be, from idiocy came harmony, from moving nothingness arose power.

The vast, almost inchoate Presence spoke through the tremolant silence.

"My programs include no such information," it said plaintively.

"They do now," Hermes answered. He had swallowed his dread

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and talked as befitted the herald of the Olympians.

"We too are real," he added for emphasis. "As real as any other mortal deed or dream. Cooperation will be to your advantage."

The soundless voice turned metal. "What functions remain to you?"

"Hear me," said Hermes. "In the dawning of their days, most gods claim the entire creation for their own. We of Hellas did, until we discovered what the Triple Goddess we thought we had supplanted could teach us. Afterward the saints tried to deny us in turn. But we bore too much of civilization. When men discovered that, the time became known as the Rebirth."

The faceless vortex scanned its memory banks. "Renaissance," it corrected.

"As you will," *you smug bastard.* "You'll find you can't get along without Jesus, whose ethic helps keep men from completely exploding the planet; and Yahweh's stiff-necked 'No' to every sly new superstition; and other human qualities embodied in other gods. As for us Olympians, why, we invented science."

The answer was chilling in its infantile unwisdom. "I want no generalities. Garbage in, garbage out. Give me specifics."

Hermes stood quiet, alone.

But he was not Wayfarer, Thief, and Magician for nothing. He recalled what Vanessa had told him on the far side of space-time, and he tossed his head and laughed.

"Well, then!" he cried into the white weirdness. "How often do your hierophants get their cards back folded, stapled, spindled, mutilated, and accompanied by nasty letters?"

"Query query query," said the Presence, rotating.

"Scan your records," Hermes urged. "Count the complaints about wrongful bills, misdirected notices, wildly unbalanced books, false alarms in defense systems, every possible human error compounded a millionfold by none but you. Extrapolate the incidence—" he thanked the shade of Archimedes for that impressive phrase— "and the consequences a mere ten years forward."

He lifted his caduceus, which wagged a monitory snake. "My friend," he declared, "you would by no means be the first god whose people got disgusted and turned from him early in his career. Yours could be the shortest of the lot. Granted, you'll be glad enough to retire at last, when man hare off after something else. But don't you want your glory first, the full development of your potential? Don't you want beautiful temples raised to your honor, processions, rites, poets and musicians inspired by your splendor, priests expounding your opinions and genealogy and sex life, men taking their oaths and living and dying by you, for centuries? Why, as yet you haven't so much as a name!"

Abashed but logical, the other asked, "What can your kind do?"

"Think of us as elder statesmen,"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Hermes said. "We can advise. We can provide continuity, tradition, richness. We can take the sharp edges off. Consider. Your troubles are and will be due to your programs, which mortals prepare. Let a priest or a programmer get out the wrong side of bed, and the day's services will be equally botched in either case, the oracles equally garbled, the worshipers equally jarred. Well, we old gods are experienced in handling human problems.

"Mind you," he went on in haste, "we don't want any full-time partnership. It's just that you can be helped along, eventually you *will* be helped along, by your predecessors, same as we all were in our time. Why not make things easy on yourself and cooperate from the start?"

The other pondered. After a million microseconds it replied: "Further information is required for analysis. I must consult at length with you beings, of whose existence I was hitherto unapprised." And Hermes knew he had won.

Triumphant, he leaned forward through N-space and said, "One more item. This will sound ridiculous to you, but wait a few hundred years before judging. Tell me. . .what do you eat?"

"Data," he told Vanny when they were back in her apartment.

They lounged side by side on the sofa. His arm was around her shoulder; she snuggled against his. Contentment filled his belly. Outside, traffic noises had dwindled, for the clock showed past midnight. Inside, a soft lamp glowed and bouzouki music lilted from a tape recorder.

"I should've guessed," she murmured. "What's the taste like?"

"No single answer. Data come in varieties. However, any crisp, crunchy raw datum—" He sighed happily, thereby inhaling the sweet odor of her tresses.

"And think of the possibilities in processing them."

"Endless. Plus the infinitude of combinations. Your binary code is capable of replicating—or synthesizing—anything. And if inventiveness fails, why, we'll throw in a randomizing factor. Our cuisine problem is solved for the rest of eternity."

He stopped. "Excuse me," he said. "I don't want to bore you. But at the moment I am in heaven. After those ages—at the end of this particularly miserable week—suddenly, Vanny, darling, it's Sumday!"

He hugged her. She responded.

"Well, uh," he said, forever the gentleman, "you must be tired."

"Silly," she answered. "How could I sleep after this much excitement?"

"In that case," Hermes said. There was no further speech for some while.

But when matters had reached a certain point, he recalled his debt to her. "You prayed for your lover's return," he said, conscious of his own punctilio and partially disentangling himself.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I s'pose." Vanny's words were less distinct than her breath. "Right now I'm on the rebound."

"I'll ask Aphrodite to change his heart and—"

"No," she interrupted. "Do I want a zombie? I'll have him of his own free will or not at all."

Considering what she had earlier voiced about freedom, Hermes felt bemused. "Well, what do you want?"

Vanny re-entangled. "M-m-m," she told him.

"I. . .I couldn't stay past tonight," he warned her.

"Okay, let's make the most of tonight." She chuckled. "I never imagined Greek gods were bashful."

"Damnation, I'd like to treat you fairly! Do you know the embrace of a god is always fertile?"

"Oh, don't worry about that," Vanny said. "I've taken my pill."

He didn't understand her, decided it was indeed a waste of time trying, and gathered her in.

Some weeks later, she discovered that the embrace of a god is *always* fertile.

But that was good, because word reached Roy. When he discovered she had become liberated, he discovered he wanted her to cease and desist forthwith. He stormed around to her place and demanded the name of the scoundrel. She told him to go to Tartarus. Then after a suitable period—the embrace of a god confers much knowledge—she relented.

They are married, officially and squarely, and live in a reconverted farmhouse. Though she has never identified the unknown, he has equal adoration for her three children. They keep her too busy to accompany him on most of the city trips which his lucrative commissions involve. Therefore he leaves reluctantly and hastens back. The embrace of a god confers enduring loveliness. . .and, as observed, much knowledge.

They have even gotten off pot.

But as for what comes of the alliance between old divinities and new, and as for the career of a hero (in the original sense of that word) whose first victory was over a pill, this story has yet to happen.

THIS MONTH'S COVER: Looking down on the north pole of Saturn. Just above to the left is the dark nebula known as the Coal Sack. Immediately above that is the Southern Cross. The bright star with two faint companions above Saturn on the left is Alpha Centauri, our nearest star, about four light years away.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

JOANNA RUSS

BOOKS

THE DIALECTIC OF SEX, Shulamith Firestone, Bantam, $1.25
ABYSS, Kate Wilhelm, Doubleday, $4.95
THE LIGHT FANTASTIC, Harry Harrison, ed., Scribner's, $5.95
PARTNERS IN WONDER, Harlan Ellison (collaborations with various authors), Walker, $8.95
THE DAY AFTER JUDGMENT, James Blish; Doubleday, $4.95

IT'S LONG BEEN A TRUISM OF our field that science fiction is better at gadgets than people. Unfortunately the truism is also a truth. Our social extrapolation is pretty much in the state technical extrapolation used to be—one change projected into the future without the (necessarily) accompanying changes in everything else. Even the supposed innovations in social structure almost always turn out to be regressive—e.g. Heinlein's family system in MOON IS A HARSH MISTRESS is a patriarchal, patrilocal "stem" family very like those of the middle ages, with the added feature of *droit du seigneur* for the men (in order of seniority). None of this is new.

The most exciting social extrapolation around nowadays can be found in THE DIALECTIC OF SEX by Shulamith Firestone. You will have a hard time with this book if you believe that Capitalism is God's Way or that Manly Competition is the Law of the Universe—but then you can go back to reading the Skylark of Valeron or whatever and forget about the real future. Firestone is a radical, a feminist, a Marxist (or rather, a thinker who has absorbed both Marx and Freud) and the author of a tough, difficult, analytic, fascinating book. In her extrapolated future:

There will be no distinction between the political and the personal.

There will be no split between sex and emotion.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The dichotomy of emotion vs. reason will vanish.

The technological and the aesthetic will merge. High art will disappear. In fact, culture as we know it will vanish, to be replaced by serious play and direct satisfaction.

Childhood, a fairly recent invention, will vanish.

The family will die—that is, the parental role will be diffused to everybody, just as the "feminine" role will be diffused to everybody.

Children will be compensated by society for their physical weakness and their inexperience.

Artificial reproduction will be available as an option (it is very close to being possible right now).

Racial caste arises from the paradigm of caste embodied in the family; with the creation of an androgynous world, racism will disappear. The psychology of power, whose source is the biological family, will disappear.

There will be no distinction between child society and adult society, male cultural experience and female cultural experience; in fact, sexuality will become polymorphous-perverse, thus taking the compulsiveness out of it and uniting it with all love and all play.

There is a good short history of the woman's suffrage movement, a fine analysis of the connection between opposition to population control and the chauvinism of the private family ("private bid for immortality"), a good explanation of scientific schizophrenia and Snow's two cultures, a short history of childhood (which began only a few centuries ago), and some fascinating alternatives to the family which recall much of Samuel Delany's fiction. To say, for example, that children are oppressed as a class seems absurd, but consider:

> Children must be living embodiments of happiness. . .it is every parent's duty to give his child a childhood to remember. . .This is the Golden Age that the child will remember when he grows up. . ."minors" under the law without civil rights, the property of an arbitrary set of parents. . .economic dependence. . .It is clear that the myth of childhood happiness flourishes so wildly not because it satisfies the needs of children but because it satisfies the needs of adults. . . . (pp. 93-95)

Within a century, she says, if we don't blow ourselves up.

The two novellas that make up Kate Wilhelm's ABYSS are flawed, the first ("The Plastic Abyss") because it attempts more than most successes and the second ("Stranger in the House") because of Wilhelm's entirely original set of virtues and defects.

As George Orwell has pointed out, most human "worlds" are not represented in art at all, for to be a member of such a world demands that one not be an artist. Orwell's example is Kipling, who managed somehow to become a full member of colonial Anglo-Indian society *and yet* keep enough of an antithetical self alive to report well on that same society. Not only to describe but to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

embody in oneself a world-view that leaves no room for art takes quite a lot of doing.

Kate Wilhelm is an escapee from the feminine mystique. As Shulamith Firestone points out, women and men live in different cultures though neither group knows it—men consider the male experience to be the only reality, and so do women, who therefore distort and deny their own experience. Until recently we have had of the female experience only versions sentimentalized and distorted in the service of self-glorification and the status quo. Good women artists have generally had atypical experiences; as a friend of mine put it, they've brought themselves up as men, since "man"—in the general view—was the equivalent of "human".* Like Kipling, Kate Wilhelm manages to be both an artist and the voice of an experience *that is defined by its not having a voice.* To find a voice one must move out of this culture and yet stay in it; Wilhelm almost does this. "The Plastic Abyss" is the eerie fusion of women's-magazine "reality" and real reality, as if sentimental pictures had suddenly begun to move and speak. There is a tall, glamorous, hard, patronizing husband in "The Plastic Abyss" who is breathtakingly close to the Ideal Husband of bad fiction; there is the Sweet, Ideal, Passive Wife of romance who almost makes it into artistic definition; and there is the magnificently irresponsible playing-around with reality only possible to those who don't have the conventional stake in it and are therefore wise enough not to believe in it. Still, there are vestiges of un-ironic cardboard. The heroine of "Plastic Abyss" says she "should go back to work, back to writing articles, to traveling, prying, learning", although it is perfectly clear from her character that she has never done any of those things; the heroine of "Stranger" has a "fashion" job that is never made real to her or anybody else. There is a stepdaughter in "Plastic" who (we are told) will do better than the heroine, although her situation is in no way different. There is a Nice Young Painter who is something of a nebbish but otherwise rather sketchily realized. There is a patronizing Good Old Man who is as much of a sexist as the Bad Husband, though Wilhelm doesn't think so. The Bad Husband is put down by the Good Old Man and The Real Scientist, not by his wife, who remains passive and dependent throughout. She escapes from her dependency, her childishness and her husband only by jumping clean out of reality. She then finds out that she's the one who's controlling everybody else. "Stranger" is more conventional and easier to follow, although again the woman (and the young people) are more alert to what's going on than the men and readier to believe in what is real but strange. Wilhelm gets her second heroine's husband out of the way by giving him a bad heart medically; the husband of "Plastic Abyss" has a bad

*e.g. myself and Anne McCaffrey.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

heart humanly. I was struck in both novellas by what seemed to me the unearned adultation given to both women, but I wonder if this simply reflects our not being used to feminine protagonists who are involved in real activity. Most male protagonists in sf are glorified (or unrealized) in exactly the same way. It seems to be an occupational hazard. "Plastic Abyss" is much farther along the road to realized Wilhelm than "Stranger," which dates from 1967. Both stories use rhythms of narrative quite unlike those of slick fiction; the earlier tale proceeds jerkily through some awful bloopers ("When the planet had been discovered, Earth year 1896, Gron year 14,395, the excitement on Gron had been rampant") to a very moving ending; Wilhelm—luckily for her—has art but no conventional craft. Some of the writing is fine ("Gary's pale hair and the doctor's thin face side by side like a Dali distortion, facets of the same thing, and that thing not what she had always called man before"), some of it oddly unnecessary ("She had knocked over her wineglass, and sherry was spreading across the *glossy* surface of the table"—italics mine).

Knowing my radical Feminist tendencies, the Kindly Editor sent me only good books (by men) this month. Harry Harrison's THE LIGHT FANTASTIC subtitled "Science Fiction Classics from the Mainstream" is a fine, if partly an obvious, collection and reminds one what definitive treatment of a theme *can* be—from the last phrase of Anthony Burgess' "The Muse" ("not blotting a line") to the hand of God knocking on the woman's sleazy soul in C.S. Lewis' "The Shoddy Lands": It was in some curious way, soft; 'soft as wool and sharp as death,' soft but unendurably heavy, as if at each blow some enormous hand fell on the outside of the Shoddy Sky and covered it completely. And with that knocking came a voice at whose sound my bones turned to water: 'Child, child, child, let me in before the night comes.' (p.213)

I have some quibbles: Leo Szilard's charming but slight "The Mark Gable Foundation;" Gerald Kersh's "The Unsafe Deposit Box" with its large, logical hole; Kingsley Amis' "Something Strange," a good early example of a theme that is somewhat too familiar by now; and too-thin "The Door" by E. B. White (1939). There remain: "Sold to Satan" by Mark Twain, Graham Green's "The End of the Party," Borges' "The Circular Ruins," "The Shout" by Robert Graves, E.M. Forster's "The Machine Stops," John Cheever's "The Enormous Radio" and that splendid tale of Kipling's, "The Finest Story in the World." There is an extremely good introduction by James Blish. All in all, a fine collection.

On page 297 of Harlan Ellison's PARTNERS IN WONDER is a William Rotsler drawing of King Kong on top of the Empire State building, holding a squidgy little Fay

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Wray in his fist. Only her head is visible. Someone down on the sidewalk is screaming, "Trip him, Fay, trip him!" For me the cherry-and-whipped-cream of Ellison's anthologies is this quality in his introductions, for example, *"Base canard* is the bottom duck in a beachside pyramid of athletic French ducks" or "if trolley cars had wings, would elephants have overhead runners?" Through the whole book runs the strangest sweetness of triumphant, loving absurdity, of mind taking off into the wild blue.

Ellison is hung up on words and the small details of existence, just as an artist should be. "Countenances" he writes; "(conteni? contenubim?)" Ellison's mode, in both reportage and fiction, is hyperbole–in dramatic terms, *extremity*–so that he is always operating either on the absurd or the desperate edge of experience. PARTNERS is a very good collection and would be a good collection even without the introductory material; to say that most of the stories don't exist on the same level as the best of the introductions is hardly dispraise; in fact, some of the former are first-rate. Moreover (and this is rare in anthologies) they reinforce one another, so that the book benefits from the cumulative effect. The newest stories are better, the best of them being, to my mind, the Ellison/Sheckley "I See a Man Sitting on a Chair and the Chair Is Biting His Leg," which seems much more coherent in this setting than in *F & SF*, where it was previously published; Ellison's "Prowler in the City at the Edge of the World" which is at the top of the collection; the fierce and sentiment-full "Song the Zombie Sang" (Ellison and Silverberg); and the Ellison/Zelazny "Come to Me Not in Winter's White," a lyrical fairy tale (no pun intended) haunted by the ghost of a banal triangle–as every once in a while the skeletons of Zelazny's own stories show through the flesh. There is tremendous motion in all of these–Ellison's contribution, insofar as I can figure it–which is not far, for the stories are all seamless, except for Ellison/Laumer's "Street Scene" in which the patchwork-quilt effect is deliberate and quite funny. Other collaborations include "Brillo" with Ben Bova; Robert Bloch's "A Toy for Juliette" (which sparked Ellison's "Prowler"); "Up Christopher to Madness" with Avram Davidson, which may contain too much Damon Runyon but which I found a pleasant romp; "The Kong Papers," which is a delightful fribble drawn by Bill Rotsler and worded (?) by Ellison; and with A.E. Van Vogt a surprisingly vivid treatment of a familiar theme in "The Human Operators." The Ellison/Delany collaboration, "The Power of the Nail," does not quite come together nor does the scattered "Runesmith" with Theodore Sturgeon (besides, sf writers ought to resist the temptation to make their heroes turn into The Messiah). Others–quite at the level of most sf anthologies–are collaborations with Joe L. Hensley

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

(1962), Henry Slesar (1959), and Algis Budrys (1957).

James Blish continues his exploration of ethics, theology, and medieval magic in THE DAY AFTER JUDGMENT. The book is a sequel to Armageddon, which ended the earlier BLACK EASTER, and attempts to answer the question: After the death of God, what? The condensation is as fine as ever, the morality as stringent, and the keen, dry, exhilarating atmosphere of Blish's intellectuality is a pleasure of the first order. Everything in the book is as distinct and clear as an object painted by Giotto. The very syntax is brilliant and the characterization as solid as outside analysis can make it—take a look at General Willis McKnight's encounter with the image of Satanachia and his subsequent insanity (on p. 134 he decides that the demon prince is something worse; i.e., Fu Manchu) or the gem of bad reasoning on p. 23 in which Jack Ginsberg blames God for the end of the world. Blish is in his element here, and even his limitations work for him. THE DAY AFTER JUDGMENT (with BLACK EASTER for they should be read together) is—if I'm not mistaken—close to being a masterpiece. It's my uninstructed impression that relative financial independence has allowed Blish to write more idiosyncratically than he ever did before, about themes he knows may not interest large numbers of readers. Both books, like Blish's beautiful DOCTOR MIRABILIS, are absolutely *sui generis*. JUDGMENT's solution of the Problem of Evil is less overwhelmingly dramatic than the catastrophe of BLACK EASTER, probably unavoidably so. I find the masque-like Miltonics at the end both *crabb'd* and *Pedantique* but am willing to allow that the author had reasons I do not see. The magic is as fine as ever, particularly the means by which the characters rendezvous in the last chapter: airplanes, transvection, and ecstatic trance-levitation. Hell is "an incombustible Alexadrian library of. . .evasions," in Ware's ruined palazzo "the window panes were out, and the ceiling dripped; the floor was invisible under fallen plaster, broken glass and anonymous dirt; and in the *gabinetto* the toilet was pumping continuously as though trying to flush away the world."

We're lucky to have the book.

New/Revised/Illus./60p./Printed
"THE HERO PULP INDEX"
The complete, detailed and up-to-date story of the famous pulps of the 1930s & 40s: Doc Savage, Shadow, G-8, etc. etc. Illustrated with 16 pulp covers; carefully indexed by story title and authors, incl. pen-names. $4 ea; 3 for $10; or 10 for $24
OPAR PRESS, P. O. Box 550, Evergreen, Co. 80439

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

If you recall "The School Friend" (December 1970) or "Ringing the Changes" (May 1971), you'll know what to expect from this latest Robert Aickman story: i.e., a superbly written chiller, in this case one that moves from a perfectly mundane and civilized country weekend into a labyrinth of horror.

Bind Your Hair

by ROBERT AICKMAN

NO ONE SEEMED ABLE TO fathom Clarinda Hartley. She had a small but fastidious flat near Church Street, Kensington, and a responsible job in a large noncommittal commercial organization. No one who knew her now had ever known her in any other residence or any other job. She entertained a little, never more nor less over the years; went out infrequently with men; and for her holida s simply disappeared, returning with brief references to foreign parts. No one seemed to know her really well, and in the course of time there came to be wide differences of opinion about her age, and there was recurrent speculation about her emotional life. The latter topic was not made less urgent by a certain distinction in her appearance and also in her manner. She was very tall (a great handicap, of course, in the opinion of many) and well-shaped; she had very fair, very fine, very abundant hair, to which plainly she gave much attention; her face had interesting planes (for those who could appreciate them), but also soft curves, which went with her hair. She had a memorable voice, high-pitched but gentle. She was, in fact, thirty-two. Everyone was greatly surprised when she announced her engagement to Dudley Carstairs.

Or rather it was Carstairs who announced it. He could not keep it to himself as long as there was anyone within earshot who was ignorant of it, and well might he be elated because his capture followed a campaign of several years continuance, supported by few sweeping advantages. He worked in the same office as Clarinda, in a not unsatisfactory position for his thirty years, and was in every way a thoroughly presentable person; but

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

even in the office there were a number of others like him, and it would have seemed possible that Clarinda could have further extended her range of choice by going outside.

The weekend after the engagement Dudley arranged for her to spend with him and his parents in Northamptonshire. Mr. Carstairs, Senior, had held an important position on the administrative side of the Northampton boot and shoe industry; and when he retired upon a fair pension, he had settled in a small but comfortable house in one of the remote parts of a county where the remote parts are surprisingly many and extensive. Mr. Carstairs had been a pioneer in this particular because others similarly placed had tended upon retirement to emigrate to the Sussex Coast or the New Forest; but his initiative, as often happens in such cases, had been imitated until the little village in which he had settled was now largely populated by retired industrial executives and portions of their families.

Clarinda would have been grateful for more time in which to adjust herself to Dudley in the capacity of accepted lover; yet Dudley somehow did not seem to see himself in that capacity but seemed to be reluctant in any way to defer Clarinda's full involvement with her new family position. Clarinda, having said yes to what was believed to be the major question, smiled slightly and said yes to the minor.

Mr. Carstairs, Senior, met them at Blisworth station.

"Hullo, Dad." The two men gazed at one another's shoes, not wanting to embrace and hesitating to shake hands. Mr. Carstairs was smiling, benignly expectant. Plainly he was one who considered that life had treated him well. He was, one believed, almost ready to accept his son's choice of a bride as, for him, joy's crown of joy.

"Dad, this is Clarinda."

"I *say*, my boy. . . ."

Outside the station, in front of the elegant hotel, was a grey Standard in which Mr. Carstairs drove them many miles to the west. Already the sun was sinking. Soon after they arrived, they had settled down, with Mrs. Carstairs and Dudley's sister Elizabeth, to crumpets in the long winter dusk. Elizabeth had a secretarial position in Leamington and bicycled there and back every day. All of them were charmed with Clarinda. She exceeded their highest, and perhaps not very confident, hopes.

Clarinda responded to their happy approval of her and smiled at Dudley's extreme pleasure at being home. An iced cake had been specially baked for her, and she wondered whether these particular gilt-edged cups were in daily use. They neither asked her questions nor talked mainly about themselves; they all made a warm-hearted, not unskillful effort to make her feel completely one with them. She and Elizabeth discovered a common interest in the theater (shared only in a lesser degree by Dudley).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"But Leamington's so stuffy that no one's ever made a theater pay there."

"Not since the war," said Mr. Carstairs in affectionate qualification.

"Not since the *first* war," said Elizabeth.

"Is Leamington the nearest town?" asked Clarinda.

"It's the nearest as the crow flies, or as Elizabeth cycles," said Dudley, "but it's not the quickest when you're coming from London. Narrow lanes all the way."

"Fortunately we've got our own friends by now in the village," said Mrs. Carstairs. "I've asked some of them in for drinks so that you can meet them at once."

And indeed almost immediately the bell rang, and the first of the visitors was upon them. Mr. Carstairs went round the room putting on lights and drawing the curtains. Every now and then he gave some jocular direction to Dudley, who was complementarily engaged. A domestic servant of some kind, referred to by Mrs. Carstairs as "our local woman," had removed the remains of tea; and by the time Elizabeth had borne in a tray of drinks, three more visitors had added themselves to the first two.

"Can I help?" Clarinda had said.

"No," the Carstairs family had replied. "Certainly not. Not *yet*."

Altogether there were eleven visitors, only two of whom were under forty. All eleven of them Clarinda liked very much less than she liked the Carstairs family. Then just as several of them were showing signs of departure, a twelfth arrived, who made a considerable change. A woman of medium height and in early middle age, she had a lined and sallow face but an alert expression and large deeply set black eyes. She had untidy shoulder-length black hair which tended to separate itself into distinct compact strands. Her only make-up appeared to be an exceptionally vivid lipstick, abundantly applied to her large square mouth. She entered in a luxuriant fur coat but at once cast it off, so that it lay on the floor, and appeared in a black corduroy skirt and a black silk blouse, cut low, and with long tight sleeves. On her feet were heelless golden slippers.

"I've been so *busy*." She seized both of Mrs. Carstairs's hands. Her voice was very deep and melodious, but marred by a certain hoarseness or uncertainty of timbre. "Where is she?"

Mrs. Carstairs was smiling as amiably as ever, but all conversation in the room had stopped.

"Do go on talking." The newcomer addressed the party at random. She had now observed Clarinda. "Introduce me," she said to Mrs. Carstairs, as if her hostess were being a little slow with her duties. "Or am I too late?" Her sudden quick smile was possibly artificial but certainly bewitching. For a second, various men in the room missed the thread of their resumed conversations.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Of course you're not too late," said Mrs. Carstairs. Then she made the introduction. "Clarinda Hartley. Mrs. Pagani."

"Nothing whatever to do with the restaurant," said Mrs. Pagani.

"How do you do?" said Clarinda.

Mrs. Pagani had a firm and even but somewhat bony handshake. She was wearing several large rings, with heavy stones in them, and round her neck a big fat locket on a thick golden chain.

By now Mrs. Carstairs had brought Mrs. Pagani a drink. "Here's to the future," said Mrs. Pagani, looking into Clarinda's eyes, and as soon as Mrs. Carstairs had turned away, she drained the glass.

"Thank you," said Clarinda.

"Do sit down," said Mrs. Pagani, as if the house were hers.

"Thank you," said Clarinda, falling in with the illusion.

Mrs. Pagani stretched out an arm (Clarinda noticed that her arms, in their tight black sleeves, were uncommonly long) and pulled up a chair, upon which she sat. Clarinda noticed also that when she was seated her hips too looked bony and obtrusive. Altogether Mrs. Pagani gave an impression of unusual physical power, only partly concealed by her conventional clothes. It was as if suddenly she might arise and tear down the house.

"You cannot imagine," said Mrs. Pagani, "how much it means to me to have someone new in the village, especially someone more or less my own age. Or perhaps you can?"

"But I'm not going to *live* here," said Clarinda, clutching hold of the main point.

"Well, of course not. But there'll be frequent weekends. Whatever else may be said for or against Dudley, he's devoted to his home."

Clarinda nodded thoughtfully. She was aware that everyone's eyes were upon them and realized that Mrs. Pagani had so far acknowledged the presence of none of the other guests, well though she must presumably know them.

"Who would want to know any of these people?" enquired Mrs. Pagani in a husky, telepathic, undertone.

One trouble was that Clarinda rather agreed with her.

"Why do *you* live here?"

"I can't live in towns. And in the country people are the same wherever you go. Most people, I mean. You don't live in the country for the local society."

Clarinda failed to ask why you did live in the country.

Elizabeth came up with more drinks.

"Hullo, Elizabeth," said Mrs. Pagani.

For some reason Elizabeth went very red.

"Hullo, Mrs. Pagani." She left two drinks with them and hurried away on her errand of hospitality. Mrs. Pagani's eyes followed her for a few seconds. Then she turned back to Clarinda and said, "We two will be seeing a lot of one another."

Again Clarinda could only nod.

"I needn't tell you that you're not

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

what I expected. Do you know where I live?"

Clarinda, still silent, shook her head.

"Have you been round the village yet?"

"No."

"Not seen the church?"

"It was getting dark when I arrived."

"I live in the churchyard." Mrs. Pagani suddenly shouted with laughter. "It always surprises people." She placed her long bony left hand on Clarinda's knee. "There used to be a chapel in the churchyard, with a room over it. This is a thinly populated district, and they brought the corpses from the farmhouses and cottages, often a long slow journey, and left the coffin in the chapel waiting for the funeral the next day. And the mourners passed the night upstairs, watching and, of course, drinking. When all this became unnecessary, the chapel fell into ruin. The parish council was glad to sell it to me. The vicar's a hundred and one anyway. I restored it and I live in it. The ground had to be specially deconsecrated for me." Mrs. Pagani removed her hand and picked up her glass. "Come and see me." For the second time she toasted Clarinda. "I call it the Charnel House. Not quite correct, of course: a charnel house is where the dead lie *after* the funeral rite. But I thought the name rather suited *me.*" Suddenly her attention was distracted. Without moving her eyes, she inclined her head slightly sideways. "Just look at Mr. Appleby. Used to be managing director of an important company. Appleby's Arterial Bootlaces."

Clarinda could not see that Mr. Appleby, with whom she had been talking before Mrs. Pagani's arrival, was doing anything much out of the ordinary. He seemed simply to be telling stories to two or three other guests, who admittedly seemed less interested than he was. But Clarinda was unaccustomed to making twelve or fifteen intimate acquaintances for life *en bloc,* and all coming within the, at best, uncertain category of friend's friends.

Again Mrs. Pagani had drained her glass. "I must be going. I only looked in for a minute. I have a lot to do tonight." She rose and held out her hand. "Tomorrow then?"

"Thank you very much, but I'm not quite sure. I expect Mr. and Mrs. Carstairs have some plans for me."

Mrs. Pagani looked her in the eyes, then nodded. "Yes. You mustn't quarrel with them. That's very important. Well—come if you can."

Mrs. Pagani was resuming her expensive sable coat and saying good-by to Mrs. Carstairs.

"You've nothing to worry about," Clarinda heard her say. "Dudley's chosen well."

"Darling." It was Dudley standing behind Clarinda's chair. He kissed the top of her head. "Don't mind her. She's far round the bend, of course, but good-hearted at bottom. Anyway, she's the only one of her kind in the village. Pots of money too."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"What makes you think that, Dudley?" asked the marzipan voice of Mr. Appleby. Conversation about Mrs. Pagani was now general.

"Couldn't behave as she does if she hadn't, Mr. Appleby," replied Dudley.

That seemed to be the consensus of opinion.

When everyone had gone, they listened to the radio. Then they had supper, and Clarinda was permitted, after strenuous application, to participate in the washing-up. As they retired in a warm mist of gently affectionate demonstrativeness, the thought crossed Clarinda's mind that she might like to sleep with Dudley. It was still not an urgent wish, only a thought; but in Dudley there was no evidence that it was even a thought. For him the fateful outer wall of the fortress had been successfully battered down after a long siege; the course of time would bring the later degrees of capitulation.

The next morning Clarinda had to admit to herself that she was very depressed. As she lay in bed watching wisps of late autumn fog drift and swirl past her window, she felt that inside the house was a warm and cozy emptiness in which she was about to be lost. She saw herself, her real self, forever suspended in blackness, howling in the lonely dark, miserable and unheard, while her other, outer self went smiling through an endless, purposeless routine of love for and compliance with a family and a community of friends which, however excellent, were exceedingly unlike her in some way that she did not fully understand. Elizabeth might bill and coo about the theater, but it could hardly be said that any one of them had a sense of drama. They lived in the depths of the country, but had no idea of the wilderness. They were constantly together, but knew one another too well to be able to converse. Individuality had been ordered from all of them by the tides of common sentiment. Love me, said Dudley in effect, his eyes softly glowing; love mine. His London personality seemed merely a bait with which to entice her into the capacious family lobster pot. Mrs. Pagani was certainly different from the rest of them, but Clarinda was far from sure that Mrs. Pagani was her idea of an ally.

Then she got up, turned on the big electric heater, and felt that her thoughts had been the morbid product of lying too long abed. Moreover, the flying swathes of fog were most beautiful. She stood in her nightdress by the window looking at them, with the heater behind her sending ripples of warmth up her back. It was an old sash window with the original well-proportioned glazing bars. The new white paint covered numerous undercurrents in the surface of earlier coats. Clarinda liked such details in the house, always kept neat and spruce, like an old dandy whom people still cared about.

But from breakfast onwards her

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

spirits once more began to sink. One trouble was that the Carstairs family, in fact, had no plans for her whatever, nor had Dudley individually. There was a half-hearted suggestion of church, which no one seemed wishful to keep alive, and after that a sequence of minor interruptions and involved jobs which Clarinda felt could be much better organized but which everyone else seemed quietly to enjoy as they were. The whole family, Dudley included, seemed to like even the most pointless chores simply because they were being undertaken collectively. The four of them did all they could to give Clarinda a place in the various undertakings, and Clarinda hated the perverse barrier which seemed more and more to isolate her from their kindness. But when, by the middle of the afternoon (Sunday luncheon was a substantial reaping of the morning's seedtime), no one had even suggested a walk, she did something precipitate. Without speaking to Dudley, who was helping his father in the garden, she went up to her bedroom, changed into a pair of trousers and a sweater, donned her mackintosh, wrote on the inside of a cigarette box "Gone for a walk. Back soon," and quietly left the house.

The swathes of fog were still sweeping before the wind, but, though damp, it was not a cold wind nor unfriendly. Immediately that she was away from the house, Clarinda felt alive again. After walking a few hundred yards rather furtively, she ascended a roadside bank from which the grass had recently been sickled and looked about her. She was looking for the church; and when, through a break in the mist, she saw the battlemented top of the yellow stone tower, with a jutting gargoyle at each corner, she knew which way she would go. She turned her back on the church and walked away from the few cottages which made up the village. Mrs. Pagani had possibly served a purpose as seriocomic relief the previous evening, but Clarinda had no wish to enlarge the acquaintanceship.

The patches of cloud and fog drifted and lifted, making constant changes of scene. There was no hope of sunshine, but the mist was uncharged with smoke and served to melt the sharp air of winter and to enclose Clarinda with an advancing tent of invisibility. Other than Clarinda's light, quick step on the granite chips of the old-fashioned narrow road, the only sound was the dripping of water from the trees, the hedges, the occasional gates. At the tip of every leaf was a fat pearl about to drop and vanish. Clarinda realized that her hair was becoming damp. She bundled it onto the top of her head, soaking her hands in the process, then drew a long black scarf from her mackintosh pocket, and twisted it into a tight turban. The road seemed to be lined with dripping trees, which appeared dimly one at a time, grew into a fullness of detail which had seemed impossible a minute before, and then dissolved away, even from the backward

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

glance; but the air also was itself heavy with soft wetness. Soft and wet, but good on the face. . . "Let there be wet," quoted Clarinda to herself in her clear gentle voice. "Oh, let there be wet."

She had seen no one in the village, and if there were animals in the fields, the mist cut off sight and hearing of them. Clarinda was aware that she might have some difficult personal problems almost immediately ahead of her, but she thought nothing of them as the renewal of contact with the country, the adventurous loneliness of her walk, suffused her with their first freshness. Out of the mist advanced a small square notice-board lopsided on top of a sloping wooden pole: *No Rite of Way*, read Clarinda. *Persons Proceed Beyond This Point By Favor Only.*

It was perhaps an unusual announcement and was not made more convincing by the misspelling or by the crudeness of the erection, but Clarinda had heard of landowners who close gates on one day each year in order to prevent the establishment of an easement, and there seemed to be no change whatever in the nature or surface of the road, at least in the short distance ahead which was visible. Clarinda continued her walk.

No one, however, is entirely unaffected, either towards carefulness, or towards challenge, by passing such a notice; and in due course Clarinda realized that she was walking more slowly. Then she perceived that the road had for some time been rising slightly but continuously. It also seemed narrower, and the hedges higher. Clarinda stopped and looked at her watch. Despite the muffling mist, she could hear its ticking with extreme clarity, so silent were the hidden pastures around her. It had been something before three o'clock when she had crept out of the house; it was now something after half past. She had possibly another hour of daylight. If she went on for a quarter of that hour, there would be as much time in which to return as she had taken upon the outward journey, and the way back was along a known road and one which inclined downhill. Moreover, there had not been a single crossroads or doubtful turning. And in any case, Clarinda liked walking in the dark. Certainly neither her mind nor her stomach was inclined to a cozy crumpet tea with the Carstairs family or to a further session bound, like Catherine upon her wheel, to the mark of interrogation which Dudley remained for her. Again, therefore, she continued her walk.

The gradient increased, but the trees came more quickly, imperceptibly losing, tree by tree, the moment of clear detail which had previously characterized each of them. The road had begun to wind steeply upwards through a wood. Now the hedges, lately so high, had ceased; but the road, although the antique paving seemed more and more lost in the damp loamy soil, remained distinct. Intermittently, the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

going had become a little muddy, but the softness underfoot made a change from the angular granite. The trees had now become dim and uniform shapes which passed so quickly and monotonously that sometimes they seemed almost to move, as in a very early motion picture.

Then, unmistakably, something else was moving. From among the tall thin trees, and out of the veiling mist, came a small animal. It crossed the track ten or twelve feet in front of Clarinda and disappeared again almost at once. It neither walked nor ran, but slowly ambled. It was not quite silent, but the atmosphere made the sound of its passage seem insufficient; it whispered and sighed its way through the undergrowth. Clarinda could not think what animal it was. Probably a dog which the mist had misshaped. She checked for a moment, then went on.

Swiftly and momentarily the mist cleared a larger area around her, as she had seen it do several times before. She could see many trees, and could now perceive also that they were beeches. Dotted about the bare earth which surrounds beech trees even in a thick wood, were many more of the animals. They were pigs.

Each of the pigs seemed very intent about its business, softly snuffling after unknown sweets in the naked soil. None grunted or squeaked, but the dead, brown-paper leaves rustled slightly as the herd rooted. The pigs were on both sides of the track, and again Clarinda hesitated briefly before advancing through the midst of them.

At first they took no notice of her, perhaps, she thought, unafraid of man because little knowing him; and the tent of mist, temporarily a marquee, advanced with her on to the wooded heights ahead. Then, most unexpectedly, there came from the obscurity thirty yards away on Clarinda's right a shattering animal shriek, short but so loud and high as to pain the ear. All the pigs looked up, stood motionless for a second, then massed together in the direction that the sound had come from, some of them crossing the track behind and ahead of her for the purpose. Again they stood, an indistinct agglomeration on the edge of the mist; then suddenly they swept back the way they had come. The whole herd, packed tightly together, charged across the track and disappeared into the mist on the left. The pigs had passed not more than five or six feet in front of Clarinda, who was able to observe that in the very middle of the throng was a creature much larger than the rest, a bristling, long-snouted boar, with large curving bluish-white tusks. He it was, she suspected, that had cried from the enveloping mist. She had never before seen such a creature and was slightly alarmed.

The scampering flight of the pigs could be heard for a few seconds after the fog had surrounded them. Then the wood was silent again. It was as if the pigs had been the last

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

creatures left alive in it. The fog had now closed up again, scudding across the track on a wind which seemed colder and stronger than it had been in the village at the beginning of Clarinda's walk. But the track was now rising steeply, and the extra exertion kept her warm. The long drawn-out winter dusk must have begun because not until she was right upon them did Clarinda notice two figures on the path.

They were children. They did not seem to be either ascending or descending but to be quietly waiting by the side of the track for someone to pass. They were identically dressed in one-piece waterproof garments, like small trim diving suits, bright blue in color, and provided with hoods. One child had its hood over its head, but the other was bareheaded and displayed a curly mass of silky flaxen hair, much the color of Clarinda's own in childhood. The bareheaded child had blue eyes very widely spaced, and a pale skin. The face of the other child was shadowed by its hood, and from Clarinda's altitude amounted to little more than a long red mouth. Both children, Clarinda noticed, had long red mouths. She was unable to determine their sex.

"Excuse me," said the bareheaded child, very politely. Clarinda decided it was a girl. The girl spoke well.

Clarinda stopped.

The little girl smiled charmingly. "Have you seen the pigs?" She spoke as if the pigs were a matter of common interest to them and automatically identifiable, as if a straggler from a hunt had asked had she seen the hounds?

"Yes," said Clarinda. "Are they your pigs?"

"How long ago?" asked the child, with a child's disregard of side issues.

"About five minutes ago." Clarinda looked at her watch. Quarter to four. Time to go back. "As a matter of fact, I'm afraid I frightened them."

"Silly old pigs," said the child, fortunately taking Clarinda's side. "Which way did they go? *This* way. Or *that* way." She indicated up the hill or down. Clarinda thought that she was aged about eight.

"That way, I'm afraid," said Clarinda pointing vaguely into the mist. "I hope they'll not get lost in the fog."

"There's always a fog," said the child.

Clarinda let that one go.

"What happens if I get to the top?" she asked.

The hooded child, who had said nothing, suddenly made an odd movement. It raised one foot and stamped on the ground. It was as if its whole small body were swept by a spasm. The movement reminded Clarinda of an animal which had been startled and was pawing the earth—a large animal, moreover. In the child there seemed to be a disproportionate strength. Clarinda was really frightened by it.

"There's a lovely view some days," said the bareheaded child helpfully.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Not much good this evening."

The child shook its head, smiling politely. The hooded child snatched at the bareheaded child's sleeve and pulled it sharply.

"There's a maze." The bareheaded child was showing off slightly, but meaning to help also.

"What kind of a maze? With hedges? I don't believe it." To Clarinda a maze meant Hampton Court.

"An ordinary kind of maze. You have to look for it though."

"How far away?"

"Quite near."

"Where do I look?" Clearly the child was speaking the truth, and Clarinda was interested.

"In among the bushes. There's a little path."

Clarinda noticed that the second child had cocked up its head and was looking at her. It seemed to have sharp, sallow features and big eyes. In its hood it was not unlike a falcon.

"Shall I get lost in the maze?"

The bareheaded child appeared unable to understand this question and looked at Clarinda disappointedly.

"Well that's up to me," said Clarinda coming to the rescue.

The child nodded. She had still not understood. "Thank you for telling us about the pigs."

"Thank you for telling me about the maze."

The little girl smiled her pretty smile. Really I never saw such a beautiful child, thought Clarinda. The children departed quickly down the hill. In a moment they had vanished.

Clarinda again looked at her watch. Three-fifty. She decided that she would give fifteen minutes to looking for the child's maze and that even then she would be back soon after five.

Before long she reached a gate. It was at the edge of the wood and the end of the track. Outside the wood was short down-like grass, mossy with moisture. Clarinda's feet sank into it, as into very soft rubber. There were frequent, irregularly placed clumps of thorny scrub and no sign of even the sketchiest path. The wind was still growing chillier, and the mist was darkening all the time. Clarinda had not gone fifty yards from the gate when she decided to return. The question of whether or not it would be worth looking for the maze did not arise. On top of the hill it would be easy to lose oneself without entering a maze.

In the dim light she perceived that a man was leaning against the gate and facing her. He had red curly hair, which had receded slightly at the sides, and a prominent nose. He wore pale-hued riding breeches and dark boots. Across his shoulders was a fur cape, which Clarinda vaguely connected with the idea of aviation. As Clarinda approached, he neither spoke nor moved. She saw that in his right hand he held a long thick shepherd's crook. It was black and reached from the ground to his shoulder.

Clarinda put her hand on the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

wooden drawbar of the gate. She assumed that this action would make the man move. But he continued leaning on the gate and regarding her. If she opened the gate, he would fall.

"I want to go through." It was not an occasion for undue politeness.

Without change of expression, the man swiftly placed his left hand on the other end of the drawbar. Clarinda pushed at it, but it would not slide. Not given to panic, Clarinda momentarily considered the situation, and began to climb the gate.

"Hullo," said a voice behind her. "Rufo! What do you suppose you're doing?" Unmistakably it was the voice of Mrs. Pagani.

Clarinda stepped down. Mrs. Pagani was also wearing high boots, and her head was enveloped like Clarinda's in a dark scarf; but, strangely, she was wearing the capacious and opulent fur coat in which Clarinda had first seen her. The tops of her boots were hidden beneath it.

"Rufo!" Mrs. Pagani spoke to the man by the gate as if she were calling off a foolish and overdemonstrative dog.

The man said something in a strange language. It was so unlike any language that Clarinda had heard that at first she thought he had a defect in his speech.

Mrs. Pagani, however, replied to him in what was presumably the same tongue. In her mouth it sounded less unfamiliar because she lacked his oddly throaty delivery. Clarinda wondered whether this might be Romany.

The man was remonstrating against Mrs. Pagani's reproof. Her reply was curious. She was fluently pantomimic, and Clarinda could not but gather that Rufo was being told that she, Clarinda, was to be admitted where others were to be denied. The man scowled and leered, then shuffled off. Although young and apparently strong, he stumbled in his gait and leaned on his crook. There was now very little light, but after he had gone a few paces, he appeared to draw his fur cape high over the back of his head.

"What can you think of Rufo?"

Clarinda often found Mrs. Pagani's remarks difficult to answer.

"Will you forgive him? And me?"

"There's nothing to forgive. I didn't know he couldn't speak English."

"How could you?" Clarinda got the impression that the tone of this was not apologetic, but amicably ironical. Not for the first time she thought that Mrs. Pagani implied some understanding between them which did not exist.

"And you *will* come back?"

It was ridiculous. But Mrs. Pagani had saved her from a menacing situation, and she had to say something.

"When should I come back?"

"Tonight." The intonation made it plain that no other time could be in question.

"Here?"

Mrs. Pagani said nothing, but

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dropped her head to one side and smiled.

It was almost impossible after that to seek a reason.

Moreover, Mrs. Pagani left no time.

"You've bound your hair very well."

Clarinda had been noticing how carefully Mrs. Pagani's own locks had been turbaned.

"It was getting wet."

Mrs. Pagani nodded and smiled. She was looking Clarinda over.

"Au revoir."

Clarinda had not expected that either.

"Good-by. Thank you for rescuing me."

"My dear, we wouldn't lose *you.*" Mrs. Pagani strode off. The plural was a new mystery, for Clarinda felt that it could not refer to Rufo.

Although by now it was night, Clarinda leaped and ran down the dark track. At one time she thought she heard the pigs softly rooting in the invisible undergrowth. But she did not stop to listen and duly reached the house only a few minutes after five.

Dudley seemed to take her escapade for granted although she provided no details. Clarinda wondered whether this suggested that already he was growing accustomed to her or whether it was evidence that he would be a good and unexacting husband, prepared to allow her due liberty and no questions asked. She certainly valued his success in persuading his family to adopt the same attitude.

"Out at night in winter," said Mrs. Carstairs, "when you don't have to be!" And upon her gentle mark of exclamation, the matter dropped and tea began. Clarinda wondered whether their surprising equanimity was a product of Dudley's leadership in a full discussion during her absence. She liked Dudley for not fussing, whatever his reason.

Elizabeth had got out a quantity of clothes and ranged them round her room for inspection and comparison by Clarinda. This was a lengthy undertaking. In the end there was a knock at the door.

"Liz." It was Dudley's voice outside.

"One moment." Elizabeth drew on a sweater. "Now."

Dudley entered. "I've been sent up to fetch you both downstairs." He smiled fraternally.

"We're ready," said Elizabeth looking at Clarinda as woman to woman.

On the dark landing outside, Dudley held Clarinda back for a moment and embraced her. "Go on, Liz, you fool." Elizabeth went on. "You do understand?" said Dudley to Clarinda. "At least I hope you do. I've been trying to keep out of sight as far as possible so that you can get to know the family. That walk of yours. I've been wondering."

Clarinda squeezed his hand.

"It's all right? And you do like them?"

"Of course it's all right. And I like them very much."

Every Sunday evening, Clarinda

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

understood, Mr. Carstairs read aloud from about half past six until they had supper at eight. Tonight the start had been delayed by her walk and by the discussion in Elizabeth's bedroom, but still there was time for four chapters of *Persuasion*. Mr. Carstairs read well, Clarinda thought, and the book was new to her.

Dudley, who could be persuasive in such matters, had somehow contrived to arrange that both of them could arrive late at the office the next day; otherwise they would have had to return to London that same night. Soon after supper Elizabeth had disappeared upstairs, saying that she had some letters to write and that she probably would not be coming down again. She bade Clarinda good night and kissed her affectionately on the cheekbone. About half an hour later, Mr. and Mrs. Carstairs also withdrew. Dudley went to assist his father with stoking up the boiler for the night. The clock struck half past nine. Otherwise the house was very quiet. Clarinda supposed she and Dudley were being purposefully left to themselves.

"I wish *we* could live in the country," said Dudley when he reappeared.

"I expect we could."

"Not the real country. Not unless I get another job."

"Where does the real country begin?"

"About Berkhamsted. Or perhaps Tring. Nowadays, that is."

"The country stretches in this direction only?" Clarinda smiled.

"For me it does, darling." She had not yet got in the habit of his calling her "darling." "I *belong* around here."

"But surely until recently you lived in a town? Northampton is a town isn't it?" She really wasn't quite sure.

"Yes, but I was always out and about."

Clarinda had observed that every normal English male believes that he wants to live in the country, and she said no more.

Dudley talked for some time about the advantages of the arrangement. Then he stopped, and waited for her assent. There was a slight pause.

"Dudley," said Clarinda, "how well do your father and mother know Mrs. Pagani?"

"Not very well," said Dudley, faintly disappointed. "What you would call a bare acquaintanceship. Why?"

"They asked her to the party."

"Actually they didn't. She heard about it and just came. Not the first time she's done it, either. But you can't put on airs in a small village, and she's not a bad old bird really."

"How do you know?"

"I don't," said Dudley, grinning at her earnestness. "So what?"

"What does she do with herself? Live on, I mean?"

"I don't know what she lives on, darling. Little children, I expect, like Red Riding Hood's grandmother. You know she occupies an old ruin in the churchyard?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"So she told me. I should like to go and see it."

"What, *now?*"

"Will you come with me?"

"It's a bit late for calls in the country."

"I'm not suggesting a call. I just want to have a look round."

"She might think that a trifle nosy, mightn't she?"

Clarinda nodded. "Of course you know Mrs. Pagani better than I do." She had suddenly remembered a nocturnal stroll in Marseilles with a fellow tourist, who had proved unexpectedly delightful.

"Tell you what I'll do," said Dudley, "I'll whistle you round before we push off to Blisworth tomorrow."

"We mustn't miss the train."

"Never missed a train in my life."

Clarinda's second night was worse than her first, because now she couldn't sleep at all. Dudley had considered that they should go their separate ways soon after eleven, in order, as he said, not to disturb Mr. and Mrs. Carstairs; and when the church clock, brooding over Mrs. Pagani's romantic residence, struck one, Clarinda was still tense and tumultuous in the prickly dark. Without switching on the light she got out of bed and crossed to the window. She hoped that the sudden chill would numb her writhing nerves. When, an hour and a half before, she had drawn back the curtains and opened the window at top and bottom, she had noticed that the mist seemed at last to have vanished, although it was so black that it was hard to be sure. Now the moon was rising, low and enormous, as if at the horizon the bottom edge of it dragged against the earth, and Clarinda saw that indeed all was clear, the sky starry, and the mist withdrawn to the distant shadowy hills. In the foreground there was nothing to be seen but the silent fields and naked trees.

Swiftly a bat loomed against the night and flew smack against the outer sash. Another two feet higher or two feet lower and he would have been in. Clarinda softly shivered for a moment, then watched the bat skid into invisibility. The silver-gilt autumn night was somehow warmer and more welcoming than Clarinda's unadventurous bed, fellow-bed, twin-bed to a thousand others in a thousand well-ordered houses. The grave self-sufficiency of the night was seeping into Clarinda's bloodstream, renewing her audacity, inflaming her curiosity; and its moonlit beauty agitating her heart. By the light of the big moon she began to dress.

When upon her return from the woods, she had taken off her walking shoes, she had thought them very wet; but now they seemed dried, as if by the moon's rays. She opened the door of her room. Again a bat struck the window at the end of the passage outside. There was no other sound but that of disturbed breathing, which, however, seemed all around her. The other occupants of the house slept, but, as it appeared,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

uneasily. She descended the stairs and creaked into her mackintosh before trying the door. She expected difficulty here, but it opened at a touch. Doubtless it would be haughty to lock one's doors in a village.

The moon shone on the gate and on the lane beyond, but the long path from the front door was in darkness. With the moon so low the house cast a disproportionate shadow. As Clarinda walked down the narrow strip of paving, a hare scurried across her feet. She could feel his warmth on her ankles as he nearly tripped her. The gate had a patent catch which had caused her trouble before, and she had to stand for half a minute fumbling.

As she walked along the road, passed the "By Favor Only" notice, and began to ascend into the wood, she never doubted that at the top of the hill would be some remarkable warrant for her efforts; and she was resolved to find out what it was. Now the regular roadside trees were as clear-cut and trim as a guard of honor, and the owls seemed to be passing a message ahead of her into the thickets. Once or twice, when entering a straighter part of the road, she thought she saw a shambling figure rounding the distant corner ahead, but she decided that it was probably only a shadow. The bats were everywhere, hurtling in and out of the dark patches, and fluting their strange cries, which Clarinda was always so glad that she was among those who are privileged to hear. There were even some surviving or revitalized moths, and a rising perfume of moisture and decay.

The gate at the hilltop was shut. But as soon as Clarinda drew near, she saw the little blue girl standing by it.

"Hullo."

"Hullo," said Clarinda.

"You're rather late."

"I'm very sorry. I didn't know."

"It's important to be punctual." The child spoke in a tone of earnest helpfulness.

"I'll try to remember," said Clarinda humbly.

The child had opened the gate and was leaning back against the end of it, her chin stuck in her neck and her feet in the ground, holding it for Clarinda.

Clarinda passed through. The moon was now higher, and the soft grass glistened and gleamed. Even in the almost bright light there was no sign of a continuing path.

"I shall get my feet wet."

"Yes, you will. You should wear boots." Clarinda observed that the legs of the child's blue garment were stuck into close-fitting black Wellingtons. Also its hood was now over its head.

There was no sign of the other child.

The little girl had carefully shut the gate. She stood looking ruefully at Clarinda's feet. Then apparently deciding there was nothing to be done about them, she said very politely, "Shall I show you where you change?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Can I change my shoes?" asked Clarinda, humoring her.

"No, I don't think you can change your shoes," said the child very seriously. "Only everything else."

"I don't want to change anything else."

The child regarded her, all at sea. Then, perhaps considering that she must have misunderstood, she said, "It's over there. Follow me. And do take care of your feet."

It certainly was very wet, but the grass proved to be tussocky, and Clarinda did her best to keep dry by striding from tussock to tussock in the moonlight.

"Rufo's in there already," said the child conversationally. "You see you're the last."

"I've said I'm sorry."

"It doesn't matter." This was uttered with that special magnanimity only found in the very young.

The little girl waded on, and Clarinda struggled after her. There was no sign of anyone else; indeed, the place looked a hilltop of the dead. The lumpy, saturated grass and the rank and stunted vegetation compared unfavorably with the handsome trees behind.

There was one place where the briars and ragged bushes were particularly dense and abundant, constituting a small prickly copse. Round the outskirts of this copse, the child led the way until Clarinda saw that embedded in its perimeter was a rickety shed. Possibly constructed for some agricultural purpose but long abandoned by its maker, it drooped and sagged into the ground. From it came a penetrating and repugnant odor, like all the bad smells of nature and the stockyard merged together.

"That's it," said the little girl, pointing. They were still some yards off, but the feral odor from the shed was already making Clarinda feel sick.

"I don't think I want to go in there."

"But you *must*. Rufo's in there. All the others changed long ago."

Apart from other considerations, the shed seemed too small to house many; and Clarinda could now see that the approach to it was thick with mud, which added its smell to the rest. She was sure that the floor of the shed was muddy almost to the knees.

The child's face was puckered with puzzlement.

"I'm sorry," said Clarinda, "but you know I don't want to change at all."

Clearly she was behaving in quite the wrong way. But the child took a grip on the situation and said, "Wait here. I'll go and ask."

"All right," said Clarinda. "But I'll wait over there, if you don't mind." The child seemed not to notice the awful smell, but Clarinda was not going to be the first to mention it.

"*There,*" said the child, pointing to an exact spot. Clarinda took up her stance upon it. "Mind you don't move."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Not if you hurry." The smell was still very detectable.

"Quite still," insisted the child.

"Quite still," said Clarinda.

Swiftly, the child ran three times around Clarinda in a large circle. The light was so clear that Clarinda could see the drops of water flying up from her feet.

"*Hurry,*" urged Clarinda; and, the third circle complete, the child darted away round the edge of the copse in the direction from which they had come.

Left alone in the still moonlight, Clarinda wondered whether this were not her great chance to return home to safety and certainty. Then she saw a figure emerging from the dilapidated hut.

The figure walked upright, but otherwise appeared to be a large furry animal, such as a bear or an ape. From its distinctive staggering uncertainty of gait, Clarinda would have recognized Rufo, even without the statements of the little girl. Moreover, he was still leaning upon his long crook, which stuck in the mud and had to be dragged out at every step. He too was going back round the edge of the copse, the same way as the child. Although he showed no sign of intending to molest Clarinda, she found him a horrifying sight and decided upon retreat. Then she became really frightened because she found she could not move.

The hairy, slouching figure drew slowly nearer, and with him came an intensification of the dreadful smell, sweet and putrid and commingled. The animal skin was thick and wrinkled about his neck and almost covered his face, but Clarinda saw his huge nose and expressionless eyes. Then he was past, and the child had reappeared.

"I ran all the way." Indeed it seemed as if she had been gone only an instant. "You're not to bother about changing because it's too late anyway." Clearly she was repeating words spoken by an adult. "You're to come at once, although of course you'll have to be hidden. But it's all right," she added reassuringly. "There've been people before who've had to be hidden." She spoke as if the period covered by her words were at least a generation. "But you'd better be quick."

Clarinda found that she could move once more. Rufo, moreover, had disappeared from sight.

"Where do I hide?"

"I'll show you. I've often done it." Again she was showing off slightly. "Bind your hair."

"What?"

"Bind your hair. Do be quick." The little girl was peremptory but not unsympathetic. She was like a mother addressing an unusually slow child whom she was none the less rather fond of. "Haven't you got that thing you had before?"

"It was raining then." But Clarinda in fact had replaced the black scarf in her mackintosh pocket after drying it before the Carstairs' kitchen fire. Now, without knowing why, she drew it out.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Go *on.*" Clarinda's sluggishness was making the child frantic.

But Clarinda refused to be rattled. With careful grace she went through the moonlit ritual of twisting the scarf round her head and enveloping her abundant soft hair.

The child led her back halfway round the copse to where there was a tiny path between the bushes. This path also was exceedingly muddy, ploughed up, as Clarinda could plainly see, by innumerable hoof-marks.

"I'd better go first," said the little girl, adding with her customary good manners, "I'm afraid it's rather spiky."

It was indeed. The little girl, being small, appeared to advance unscathed; but Clarinda, being tall, found that her clothes were torn to pieces, and her face and hands lacerated. The radiance of the moon had sufficed outside, but in here it failed to give warning of the thick, tangled briars and rank whipcord suckers. Everywhere was a vapor of ancient cobwebs, clinging and greasy, amid which strange night insects flapped and flopped.

"We're nearly there," said the little girl. "You'd better be rather quiet."

It was impossible to be quiet, and Clarinda was almost in tears with the discomfort.

"*Quieter,*" said the little girl, and Clarinda did not dare to answer back.

The slender, muddy trail, matted with half-unearthed roots, wriggled on for another minute or two, and then the little girl whispered, "Under here."

She was making a gap in the foliage of a tall round bush. Clarinda pushed in. "Ssh," said the little girl.

Inside it was like a small native hut. The foliage hung all round, but there was room to stand up and dry ground beneath the feet.

"Stand on this," whispered the little girl, pointing to a round, sawn section of tree, about two feet high and four in diameter. "I call it my fairy dinner table."

"What about you?"

"I'm all right, thank you. I'm always here."

Clarinda climbed onto the section of tree and made a cautious aperture in the boscage before her.

The sight beyond was one which she would never forget.

Clearly, to begin with, this was the maze, although Clarinda had never seen or heard of such a maze before. It filled a clearing in the copse about twenty or thirty yards wide and consisted of a labyrinth of little ridges, all about nine inches high. The general pattern of the labyrinth was circular, with involved inner convolutions everywhere, and at some points flourishes curving beyond the main outer boundary, as if they had once erupted like boils or volcanic blowholes. In the valleys between the ridges, grass grew, but the ridges themselves were trodden bare. At the center of the maze was a hewn block of stone, which put Clarinda in mind of the Stone of Scone.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Little of this, however, had much immediate significance for Clarinda, because all over the maze, under the moon, writhed and slithered and sprawled the smooth white bodies of men and women. There were scores of them; all apparently well-shaped and comely; all (perhaps for that reason) weirdly impersonal; all recumbent and reptilian, as in a picture Clarinda remembered having seen; all completely and impossibly silent beneath the silent night. Clarinda saw that all round the maze were heaps of furry skins. She then noticed that the heads of all the women were bound in black fillets.

At the points where the coils of the maze surged out beyond the main perimeter were other, different figures. Still wrapped in furs, which distorted and made horrible the outlines of their bodies, they clung together as if locked in death. Down to the maze the ground fell away a few feet from Clarinda's hiding place. Immediately below her was one of these groups, silent as all the rest. By one of the shapeless figures she noticed a long thick staff. Then the figure soundlessly shifted, and the white moonlight fell upon the face of the equally shapeless figure in its arms. The eyes were blank and staring, the nostrils stretched like a running deer, and the red lips not so much parted as drawn back to the gums; but Clarinda recognized the face of Mrs. Pagani.

Suddenly there was a rustling in the hiding place. Though soft, it was the first sound of any kind since Clarinda had looked out on the maze.

"Go away, you silly little boy," muttered the little girl.

Clarinda looked over her shoulder.

Inside the bower, the moonlight, filtered through the veil of foliage, was dim and deceitful; but she could see the big eyes and bird-of-prey mien of the other child. He was still wearing his bright-blue hooded garment; but now the idea occurred to Clarinda that he might not be a child at all, but a well-proportioned dwarf. She looked at the black ground before stepping down from the tree trunk, and instantly he leapt for her. She felt a sharp, indefinite pain in her ankle and saw one of the creature's hands yellow and claw-like where a moonbeam through the hole above fell on the pale wood of the cut tree. Then in the murk the little girl did something which Clarinda could not see at all, and the hand jerked into passivity. The little girl was crying.

Clarinda touched her torn ankle and stretched her hand into the beam of light. There was a mess of blood.

The little girl clutched at Clarinda's wrist. "Don't let them see," she whispered beseechingly through her tears. "Oh, please, don't let them see." Then she added with passionate fury, "He always spoils *every*thing. I hate him. I hate him. I hate him."

Clarinda's ankle hurt badly, and there was palpable danger of blood poisoning, but otherwise the injury was not severe.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Shall I be all right if I go?"

"Yes. But I think you'd better run."

"That may not be so easy."

The little girl seemed desolated with grief.

"Never mind," said Clarinda. "And thank you."

The little girl stopped sobbing for a moment. "You *will* come back?"

"I don't think so," said Clarinda.

The sobbing recommenced. It was very quiet and despairing.

"Well," said Clarinda, "I'll see."

"Punctually? That makes all the difference, you know?"

"Of course," said Clarinda.

The child smiled at her in the faint moonlight. She was being brave. She was remembering her manners.

"Shall I come with you?"

"No need," said Clarinda rather hastily.

"I mean to the end of the little path."

"Still no need," said Clarinda. "Thank you again though. Good-by."

"Good-by," said the little girl. "Don't forget. Punctual."

Clarinda crept along the involved muddy path; then she sped across the soft wet sward, which she spotted with her blood, through the gate where she had seen Rufo and down the hill where she had seen the pigs, past the ill-spelled notice, and home. As she fumbled with the patent catch, the church clock that kept ward over Mrs. Pagani's abode struck three. The mist was rising again everywhere, but in what remained of the moonlight, Clarinda, before entering the house, unwound the black scarf from her head and shook loose her soft abundant locks.

The question of Mrs. Pagani's unusual dwelling place arose, of course, the next morning, as they hurriedly ate the generously over-large breakfast which Mrs. Carstairs, convinced that London meant starvation, pressed upon them.

"Please not," said Clarinda, her mouth full of golden syrup. She was wearing ankle socks to conceal her careful bandage. "I just don't want to go."

The family looked at her, but only Dudley spoke. "Whatever you wish, darling."

There was a pause, after which Mr. Carstairs remarked that he supposed the good lady would still be in bed anyway.

But here, most unusually, Mr. Carstairs was wrong. As Dudley and Clarinda drove away, they saw the back of Mrs. Pagani walking towards the church and not a couple of hundred yards from their own gate. She wore high stout boots, caked with country mud, and an enveloping fur coat against the sharpness of the morning. Her step was springy, and her thick black hair flew in the wind like a dusky gonfalon.

As they overtook her, Dudley slowed. "Good morning," he shouted. "Back to the grindstone."

Mrs. Pagani smiled affectionately.

"Don't be late," she cried, and kissed her hand to them.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Where were you for all those years?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

There is not one, but a handful of mad scientists in this story about the wacky goings on at Serendipitous Laboratories, an unorthodox outfit that has a government contract to fight pollution and comes up with (among other things) mutated winged goats that eat smog.

Only Who Can Make A Tree?

A Parabolic Paramyth

by PHILIP JOSE FARMER

"YOU'LL HAVE TO ADMIT THAT Serendipitous Laboratories cleared away the smog," Dr. Kerls said.

Bobbing, he danced; the toe of his left shoe striking the floor and seeming to catch and pull him backwards. He was a very short, middle-aged, and fat chemist. The top of his head looked like the back of a hog, and his voice was high and thin.

"Smog, shmog!" Dr. van Skant said. He snorted as if he had a noseful of nitrogen oxide. "What kind of pollution problem you think a few trillion moths produce, eh? Godalmighty, they're still bulldozing them off the freeways. And I had to stop twice to clean them out of my exhaust pipe! Twice! Godalmighty!"

Kerls grinned and bobbed his head and rubbed his hands together.

"Except for being a failure, the experiment was a success, you'll have to admit that."

The federal inspector-scientist did not reply. He looked around the huge laboratory. Tubes and retorts were bubbling, booping, and beeping. Colored liquids were racing up and down and around transparent plastic and glass pipes. A control panel was pulsing with lights and squeaking and pinging. Tapes were running this way and that. Generators were hurling wormy sparks back and forth, like robot baseball players warming up before a game.

Two white-coated men were pouring chemicals into tubes, and the tubes were throwing off frosty, evil-smelling, evil-looking clouds.

"Where in hell is the table?" van Skant snarled. He was a very tall and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

huge-paunched man with glasses and a thick blond moustache, and he spoke from behind, or through, a big green cigar at all times.

"What table?" Dr. Kerls said squeakily. He cringed.

"The table with the sheet under which is the monster waiting for the lightning stroke to bring it to life, you nitwit!"

Kerls laughed nervously. "Oh, you're joking! It is impressive, ain't it?"

"Should be," van Skant growled. "You jerks set it up just to impress me."

Kerls looked around helplessly.

Dr. Lorenzo smiled and waved at van Skant. He was very short and thin and had a bald forehead with a great Einsteinian foliage of hair behind the baldness to compensate.

Dr. Mough, very short, stern-faced, his hair cut in stylish bangs across his forehead, grimaced at Kerls.

"You jest, of course?" Kerls said. He danced backwards while he cracked his knuckles to the tune of *The Pirates of Penzance* overture.

"Does this place hire nothing but psychotics?" van Skant said.

"Serendipitous Laboratories hires nothing but the best," Kerls said.

Van Skant stopped and stared. Dr. Lorenzo had poured the contents of a tall beaker into a rubber boot, and Dr. Mough, holding the top of the boot shut, was shaking it.

"I think they're testing out a new type of vulcanizer," Kerls said.

Mough set the boot upright on the floor, and he and Lorenzo stepped back.

The boot, stiff as a sailor at the end of a three-day leave, rumbled. Then it leaped like a kangaroo down the aisle between tables, hit the wall, bounced, and did not fall but erupted.

The brownish fluid sprayed over half of the huge room. Drs. Kerls and van Skant were caught with their mouths open.

"Coffee!" van Skant howled. "You guys are making coffee! On government time!"

"Gee, is that it?" Kerls said, licking his lips. "Not bad. Better than what they usually make. But they were actually trying to make instant cement. Hyungh! Hyungh!"

Van Skant wiped the brown stuff from his face with a handkerchief.

"I'll shut this place down! Cut off the federal funds! You're working on a government contract to combat pollution!"

Dr. Mough, the little man with the bangs, said, "Quite true, my dear Doctor van Skant. But we're on our coffee break, and we don't have to account for what we do then."

He turned to Dr. Kerls.

"Clean this mess up."

Kerls looked indignant. "Me? You and Lorenzo made the mess."

Mough made the peace sign with his two fingers, poked Kerls in the eyes with them, rapped him on the head with the butt of his palm, punched him in the belly, and hammered his forehead again when Kerls doubled up.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Don't talk back to the assistant project director!"

Kerls staggered off while van Skant, goggle-eyed, watched him.

"Not too much trouble with discipline here," Dr. Mough said. "We run a tight ship."

Van Skant followed Mough. Kerls seemed to be alleviating his pain with liquid from a flask he had taken from his hip pocket.

"Inspiration is found in many places," Mough said, noting van Skant's questioning expression. "Dr. Kerls often comes up with an idea after drinking from his fount of wisdom, as he calls it, hah, hah!"

"I wish to see Dr. Legzenbreins immediately," van Skant said.

"Yeah, there she is, just going into her office," Dr. Mough said. "Ain't she too much? I'm in love with her, and so are my two colleagues, the imbeciles! But she's too dedicated to get married as yet. She's a beautiful young scientist."

"And who's that?" van Skant said, pointing at a huge, pimply faced girl in a laboratory coat who had just waddled out of the office.

"That's her mad daughter."

"Mad? You mean, angry?"

"Nuts," Mough said. "Oh, I don't mean to you, doctor! She's nuts, out of her skull, real woo-woo, you know. But a brilliant idea man! She's the one thought of the moths."

"That figures," van Skant said.

As he put the handkerchief back in his pocket, he felt something flutter. The insect that he removed and threw away was a large white moth with a scoop-shaped mouth. It flapped around and around the big room until it passed through the steam from an open tube in which bubbled a dark red liquid. The moth dropped as if it had had a heart attack and fell into the tube, where it disintegrated.

The red liquid turned a bright yellow.

Doctor Lorenzo yelped, apparently with delight, and he motioned for his colleagues and the fat girl to hasten to the tube. Kerls had just picked up a ten-foot-long glass pipe to fit onto a partially assembled setup. He turned when Lorenzo yelled, and the end of the pipe swung around and struck Mough in the back of his head. The cracking noise carried across the huge room.

Kerls dropped the pipe on Mough's head as he struggled to get up from the floor. Kerls ran, ducked behind a table, and reappeared by Lorenzo.

Mough staggered up off the floor, feeling the back of his head.

Van Skant strode up to the group, pushing his big belly as if it contained mail from the President, and he said, "What's so interesting?"

Mough's eyes had lost their glaze by then. He was looking suspiciously at Kerls, who was bending over the tube, rubbing his hands, and humming. Mough said, "Ah, Dr. van Skant, I presume? Yes, the moth undoubtedly contains the missing element, or elements, or combination thereof. We've been looking for a long time. . ."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"On government time?"

"On our lunch hour," Dr. Lorenzo said.

"It'll be easier just to use moths than to try to analyze a moth and determine the particular stuff responsible for the reaction," Dr. Kerls said. "Hyungh! Hyungh!"

"No trouble there," Dr. Lorenzo said. "We just send the janitor outside with a shovel and a bucket."

"What is that stuff?" Dr. van Skant bellowed, his face red.

"A universal solvent," Dr. Mough said, smiling proudly.

Van Skant struggled for breath and then pointed his finger at the tube. "A universal solvent? But that tube. . ."

"Oh, the reaction takes time," Kerls said, cracking his knuckles and then looking at his wristwatch, the large white-gloved hands of which were at 12:32. "In fact. . ."

The tube disappeared, and the yellow fluid splashed over the mica-topped table.

One corner of the table and a leg were gone.

A hole appeared in the floor, and a scream from the room below came up through it. And then, far below, there was a hiss of severed steam pipes. Presently, intermingled with the hiss, was a gurgle. A moment later, a splash.

"Possibly sheared plumbing," Dr. Mough said, smiling.

Van Skant's face had turned from red to gray.

"My God!" he yelled when he had finally gotten his breath—again. "It'll go all the way to the center of the earth!"

Dr. Mough passed his hand over his bangs and his face and then cried, "You jerks! You shoulda used less solvent like I told you!"

Kerls was on his right; Lorenzo, his left. His fists caught each in the mouth simultaneously, and they staggered back clutching their faces.

"How deep will that stuff really go?" van Skant screamed.

Mough blinked, rubbed the back of his head, and said, "What? Oh, that! The solvent evaporates within half an hour, so there's no problem there."

A low rumbling noise shook the building, and then the hole in the floor gushed black liquid.

Later on, after much litigation, it was established that the oil well was the property of the federal government. A few days after the suit was settled, very little mattered. But that was some time in the future.

Van Skant, in his report, admitted that he didn't remember much of anything from the moment he heard the rumble. He thought that Dr. Kerls had picked up a big plastic pipe to insert into the hole in the floor as a plug. He thought, but could not swear to it, that the end of the pipe had struck him across the forehead when Dr. Kerls turned around with it on his shoulder. He made a very poor witness for the government, and so the suit against Serendipitous Laboratories and its head, the beautiful young scientists, Dr. Legzenbreins, was dropped.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

By the time that Serendipitous had moved into a new building, the oil well had been capped and southern California was cleansed of its moths. Dr. Mough, during a news interview, said, "How were my colleagues and I to know that one of the atmospheric toxics which the moths were mutated to eat would be a sex stimulant and that the mutants would breed entirely out of hand? Uh, please don't quote that last remark."

Dr. Mough revealed that Serendipitous was mutating bats which could, as it were, vacuum-clean the air. The company was also mutating goats to eat land pollutants and refuse, and sharks which would digest oceanic pollutants.

At that very moment, Dr. Legzenbreins was in her office with her daughter.

"I need a man," Desdemona whined.

"Who doesn't?" her mother said.

Desdemona blew out her bubble gum and looked cross-eyed at the iridescent bubble. Her mother became tense. Was Desdemona getting another fabulous idea?

The big bubble collapsed into the big mouth.

"You need a man?" Desdemona said. "You? The most beautiful woman in the world?"

"That's what scares them off," Dr. Legzenbreins said. "And the few that don't scare, the studs with low IQ's, I can't stand. So I'm in as bad a way as you are. Ironic, ain't it?"

"Drs. Kerls, Lorenzo, and Mough would marry you within a minute, and they're Ph.D.'s," the daughter said, drooling.

"They're five feet tall, and I'm six feet two," the mother said. "Besides, I'm not sure they're not punch-drunk."

"They're brilliant!"

"The two states are not necessarily incompatible."

"I don't want big words. I want a man. I'm twenty-five!"

"I have a man for you," the mother said. "A psychoanalyst."

She added, "In a very high-class private sanitorium."

But she did not mean it. Her daughter provided the creative genius of Serendipitous. She herself, though a genius, was basically an analytic scientist, and her three assistants were basically synthesizers. Without madness, science would get no place, and Dr. Legzenbreins knew it.

She put on a very tight peekaboo dress and called in the three for a conference.

"I won't marry until my daughter marries and quits bugging me about her sex life or lack thereof. I'd suggest a lover. But she is, as you know, quite insane, and insists on remaining a virgin until she has a husband. Now, each of you goofballs has asked me many times to marry him."

Dr. Kerls stood up, danced backwards, cracked his knuckles, and said, "I repeat my offer."

Dr. Mough kicked him in the knee and slapped him twice in the face before he hit the floor. As Dr. Kerls

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tried to get up, he was hit on the head with the coffee tray, which bent to form a semihelmet.

"Don't interrupt!" Dr. Mough said.

Dr. Legzenbreins told them what they must do.

There was a long silence when she had finished. It was finally broken by Desdemona's "Eureka!" from the laboratory. At any other time, all would have stampeded through the door to find out what new idea she had just stubbed her mental toe on.

Dr. Legzenbreins leaned back and stretched her arms out and arched her back.

"The two survivors, uh, the two that don't marry her, will be permitted to put their names on my marriage lottery list."

Dr. Mough grabbed Dr. Lorenzo's bushy hair and yanked out a fistful. Lorenzo screamed and grabbed the top of his head and moaned.

"Don't ever let me catch you looking at her again like that," Mough said. "It ain't decent."

"Thank you, Dr. Mough," she said. "I can't stand naked lust. Especially in a scientist. It's so unprofessional."

"My pleasure," Dr. Mough said, beaming.

"What I don't like about this," Dr. Kerls said, shrinking away from Mough, "is that the loser has to settle for Desdemona."

"Is any sacrifice too great for Science?" Dr. Mough said, shuddering.

"What's Science got to do with this?" Kerls said. "Unless everything reminds you of Science?"

Dr. Legzenbreins said, "I leave it up to you gentlemen to decide who's going to be put on the, uh, go to the altar with her."

She rose and stretched again, and the three moaned.

"Shall we see what Desdemona has thought of this time?"

"I was thinking," Desdemona said, "that this food tastes more like sawdust every day. So I was going to have to find another delicatessen. And then I thought, sawdust. Termites eat wood and get fat on it. Their guts contain protozoa, you know, them teeny little parasitical animals. Protozoa use enzymes to digest the cellulose in the wood and convert it into stuff fit to digest. O.K., so thousands of tons of sawdust and chips of wood are just thrown away every year. Why couldn't these be saved and fed to people? If. . ."

"If we could mutate protozoa to live in the human gut, right?" Dr. Lorenzo said.

Dr. Mough banged him on the forehead with his fist.

"Imbecile! How do you get people to eat wood?"

"You make it palatable, indeed, delicious," Desdemona said.

"Just what I was about to say in reply to my rhetorical question," Dr. Mough said.

"I wish you'd just give me rhetorical blows," Dr. Lorenzo said. "Them real blows hurt, you know."

"If I quit hitting you, you'd say I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

didn't love you no more," Dr. Mough said. "Quit bellyaching; get to work."

Desdemona, being mad, could not be trusted to work with the dangerous chemicals and expensive apparatus. But she was permitted to use cheap chemicals and equipment while searching for something to make sawdust tasty. Dr. Kerls supervised her every move. As Dr. Mough later said, this was a fortunate decision on his part, even though he was criticized for making Dr. Kerls her watchdog.

Dr. Kerls, carrying a long glass pipe to attach to Desdemona's setup, turned around when Dr. Mough called to him. The pipe knocked over a tube of hydrocyanic acid onto Desdemona's experiment for the day. The result was a minor explosion which caused Dr. Kerls to whirl around and bang Dr. Lorenzo across the eyes with the pipe and a salt which, sprinkled over sawdust, would bring tears of joy to a gourmet. Sawdust hamburgers became Desdemona's favorite food.

She forgot that she needed protozoa to convert cellulose into food and that the protozoa had not been successfully mutated yet so it could live in the human gut. She lost weight. But the sad thing was that she was as ugly as ever, if not more so. The fat had hidden a very unesthetic bone structure.

"Takes after her father," Dr. Legzenbreins said.

One day, Dr. Kerls sneezed into a test tube of protozoa, and the next day the animalcules were turning sawdust into protein. Desdemona drank a cupful of the little beasts and soon began to gain weight on a diet that only a termite should have loved.

A week later, Dr. Lorenzo got mad at Dr. Mough and threw a beaker of protozoa at him. Mough ducked, and the beaker flew through the door of the men's room as Dr. Kerls stepped out. Dr. Mough said there was nothing to worry about, even if the protozoa were circulating in the city's sewage system. The protozoa couldn't get back into the drinking water, and what if they did?

The next day, Dr. van Skant called them all in and asked for a progress report on the antipollution projects.

"Eureka!" Desdemona cried, interrupting the conference.

"How about a virus which you can put into gasoline or any fuels burned in cars and factories? It's quiescent until blown out the exhaust with the gases. Then it combines with the gases to render them physically inert, or it attacks the pollutants and decomposes them rapidly. You kill the toxics at the source. The viruses multiply as they float through the air, and they continue to eat up the combustion products. And we can make aquatic viruses for the rivers, lakes, and oceans."

The three scientists shook hands with each other while the mother beamed at the daughter.

Van Skant said, "That's fine. But

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I want a report on what's been done, not on what you're going to do in some cloud-cuckoo-land future."

"Certainly, step this way," Dr. Mough said.

He led the federal man to a large table on which was a complicated array of very busy apparatus.

"My colleagues and I have put in many hours toiling to build this thingumajig. It's designed to make a substance to coat lungs. This coating will filter out the air pollutants and admit only pure air. How's that grab you, doctor?"

"I don't know," van Skant said slowly. "There's something wrong in your approach to the pollution problem. But I can't quite put my finger on it."

Mough and van Skant put on protective suits and went into the biological room. There Mough showed him the mutated bats, sharks, and winged goats.

"You'll notice the goats don't have any feet," Dr. Mough said. "That means that they have to fly to get from one place to another on land. And while they're flying, being big animals, they're really breathing hard to keep themselves aloft. So they take in vast quantities of polluted air, and their specialized stomachs and lungs burn up the bad stuff. That leaves a swath of clean air behind them. What the winged goats don't get, the bats will. Or maybe it's the other way around."

"Wouldn't flying elephants burn up even more bad air?" van Skant said, sneering.

"Please don't be absurd," Dr. Mough said.

"There's something I can't quite put my finger on," van Skant said, shaking his head.

Dr. Mough didn't tell him, but the thingumajig was also being used as a matrimonial roulette wheel. There were three special chemicals in the setup, each of which was presently colorless but would eventually change into a primary color. One would be red; one, purple; one, green. Mough's color was red; Lorenzo's, purple; Kerls', green. A random selector had dumped the chemicals into the setup, and so the three colleagues did not know which chemical would change color first. It was all up to chance.

The man whose color appeared first would win Desdemona's hand.

"And, God help him, the rest of her!" moaned Dr. Mough.

One day, the winged goats were gone, having eaten through the steel bars and the glass walls imprisoning them.

Several days later, the three scientists and Desdemona were having lunch in the laboratory when Dr. Legzenbreins walked out of her office. She was completely covered with a helmet and suit, being on her way to the virus section to run a late phase of an experiment. She waved at the group as she went by; the men stopped eating to groan and moan.

A moment later, Dr. van Scant, purple-faced, charged into the room.

"You're closed down!" he bellowed. "Your goddamn flying goats

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ate half my car in the parking lot! This is the last straw! I'm canceling all your government contracts!"

Drs. Kerls, Lorenzo, and Mough sprang to their feet and their heads met. The result was a loud thunk and cries of pain as they reeled back clutching their heads.

The alarm attached to the thingumajig whooped, and a bright orange light flashed.

"Oh, my God!" Kerls screamed. "It's happened!"

"What? What?" van Skant and Desdemona cried. Desdemona had been behaving rather woodenly lately, but she was aroused now.

Dr. Kerls, half-fainting, grabbed Mough.

A green thread was streaking through the mud-brown liquid in the pipes of the thingumajig.

Dr. Mough felt so sorry for his colleague, he did not hit him for having put his hands on him.

Dr. Legzenbreins raced out of the virus section, leaving the door open.

"What is it? What is it?"

Dr. Mough said, "It's the biggest. . ."

Boom!

Clouds of brown vapor and sprays of green liquid filled the laboratory.

By the time the scientists and Desdemona got back onto their feet, they could see clearly. The clouds were gone, revealing a wrecked laboratory and ruptured walls behind which had been the virus section and the zoological room.

"The green doesn't count," Kerls mumbled. "I had my fingers crossed when we swore to abide by the decision of the thingumajig."

"You'll marry Desdemona or else," Dr. Mough said.

"Or else what?" Kerls squeaked.

"Or else this!" Mough said, and he broke a beaker of yellow liquid over Kerls' head and then rammed the flaming end of a Bunsen burner against Kerls' rear when Kerls turned away from him.

Desdemona spat out green liquid.

"Gee, I feel funny," she muttered. She walked out of the laboratory as if she were made of wood.

"Think she's all right?" van Skant said. "That virus got blown all over the place, and God knows what the chemicals in the thingumajig will do."

"Won't hurt nothing," Mough said. "I'll stake my reputation on that."

"We're lost!" van Skant said, and he staggered out of the room.

Desdemona wandered around, singing, until she found a vacant lot, one in which the good earth was uncovered. And there she stood motionless, arms extended to the sides, while roots, still half-flesh, sprouted and drove into the ground through her shoes.

The fourth day, she put out buds.

The sixth day, a pigeon spotted her and landed to build a nest.

By then, hundreds of thousands of southern Californians were undergoing similar metamorphoses.

The polluters were changing into something which could not pollute and which converted carbon dioxide

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

into the much-needed oxygen. Serendipitous had found the ideal solution.

Only one was left unmetamorphosed. She had been wearing a protective suit at the time of the explosion and had not taken it off until she was certain that the danger was over.

She was the only human being left in the world.

The door bell rang.

She got up out of bed, walked through the house, and opened the front door.

Three man-sized trees stood on the porch.

"Kerls, Lorenzo, and Mough!" Dr. Legzenbreins cried.

Somehow, they had dragged up their roots and tracked her down. Love conquers all.

They tried to get through the door at the same time. Even if they had still been human beings, they would have gotten stuck. But with their extended arms–branches–they could never make it through alone.

Dr. Legzenbreins finally led them around to the backyard, where they took root with a shudder of relief. She went back to bed without closing the window, which was a mistake. She awoke with two branches caressing what she considered to be intimate places.

The other trees were hitting their branches against the one that had hold of her.

She reached up and plucked some of Mough's fruits–she thought it was Mough–and the tree quivered. Then the branches drooped and relaxed their hold.

The others continued to beat him with their branches.

But the next day all three were as rigid and motionless as trees should be, and their skin had become completely bark.

Spring came. Something popped deep within Dr. Legzenbreins.

She wished that she had not eaten Mough's fruit.

Coming next month

Featured next month is WORLD ABOUNDING, a new novelet by **R. A. Lafferty.** Our inventory is bulging with good things, including an unpublished story by **Anthony Boucher,** new stories from **Harlan Ellison, Keith Roberts, Poul Anderson, Robert Sheckley, Miram Allen deFord** and others. Plus, **Jack Vance,** with a sequel to THE FACELESS MAN. Look for the December issue, on sale October 28, or, better yet, send the coupon on page 100.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Lloyd Biggle's new story concerns Jan Darzek (also the leading character of two novels. ALL THE COLORS OF DARKNESS and WATCHERS OF THE DARK), who came to Gmorff because he was bored and found a world he loved at first sight. There *was* one problem: Gmorff was a world so young that its gods were still living, and those gods took human sacrifices.

Whom the Gods Love

by LLOYD BIGGLE, JR.

GMORFF WAS A WORLD SO young that its gods were still living.

Intelligent life came there before its time, riding the needle flames of rockets instead of evolving in properly tedious stages from the rich scum of its shallow seas. It found wealth there; so it built towns and cities, and its machines mined and harvested, and the gods waxed jealous.

But intelligence tempers reason with emotion, and even gods can become inured to compromise. A balance was achieved, and a delineation, and religions were invented and offerings performed, and the gods were satisfied.

Gmorff was still young when Arso Kermz arrived, but already the record clerks were calling themselves historians, and the religions had developed irreconcilable schisms and vast congregations of nonbelievers. The world's wealth was bringing a steady influx of newcomers: young people in search of opportunity, families turning their backs on previous failures, traders who stalked the long storage sheds at Port Gmorff and entered bids on glistening stacks of ingots and bags of golden grain, businessmen negotiating the tricky shoals of interstellar finance.

Kermz was none of these. Handsome, arrogant, wealthy, he feigned business or trading interests only to meet a businessman's or a trader's pretty wife or daughter, and he quickly cut an unsavory swath through Gmorffian society, leaving a trail of troubled marriages and dishonored families. The officials were helpless to do more than

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

discreetly ask him to leave Gmorff, for deportation proceedings would have resulted in a public airing of more scandal than they or anyone else cared to contemplate.

Kermz refused and went his way, equally indifferent to polite government protest and rude private threat, and then one night on his way to a rendezvous he unwisely followed a route along the shore, and a Thing-from-the-Sea took him.

Jan Darzek came to Gmorff because he was bored. As Number One of the Council of Supreme, he was sometimes master of the galaxy and sometimes a mere lackey to a computer; and even when the computer was the size of a world and ruled a galaxy, lackeying it could become boring.

When this happened Darzek would sift through the facts that Supreme regurgitated from time to time as incompatible with its view of the universe. Most proved to be errors, but occasionally a crisis was hinted at, in which case Darzek would appoint himself Special Emissary of Supreme and go off and deal with it.

When one of Supreme's indigestible facts translated out as the propitiation or mollification of immaterial forces or alleged divinities through deliberate termination of intelligent existence, and when Darzek had reduced that to its lowest common denominator, *human sacrifice*, he knew that Supreme had indeed filtered out a crisis. The world mentioned was Gmorff, and he issued himself a set of credentials and went.

He loved the world at sight. The citizens of Gmorff and its neighboring worlds were sufficiently human in appearance and customs to make him feel instantly at home. Gmorff was Earth before the invention of transmitting travel and communication, and Darzek reveled nostalgically in the noisy, malodorous traffic, in open streets, in taking long walks because that was sometimes the quickest way to get from one place to another. He found food that he could enjoy, prepared by cooks instead of by machines. He found stores with live employees to wait on him. So many similarities enhanced the differences: when he found every church shaped like a saucer with a swimming pool on top, suggesting baptism on a scale that staggered the imagination, he loved that, too.

The people were charming and highly civilized. They had music and drama and the added virtue, in Darzek's opinion, that it had not yet occurred to them to combine the two and have opera. Darzek could not imagine them sacrificing anything, let alone one of themselves.

Neither could the wizened veteran of Supreme's service named eeGanan, who ran the Interworld Consulate with the rank of consul and no staff. He could lovingly quote agricultural surpluses and mineral production back to the dawn of his records, and if his file contained less sociological

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

data than Darzek would have preferred, eeGanan's reaction of blank astonishment at least proved that human sacrifice did not occur casually on street corners. eeGanan consulted his file, negatively, and thereafter he rechecked it as often as Darzek thought of a different way to put the question.

There the matter stood, with Darzek enjoying himself immensely and accomplishing nothing at all, until the morning after the disappearance of Arso Kermz. Darzek made his routine daily visit to the consulate and found eeGanan complaining bitterly. Kermz was an alien; so he would have to investigate and file a report.

"I'll come along," Darzek said. He had heard of Kermz's activities, and death by misadventure seemed a bit too opportune and very much too neat. He was curious.

The Director of Public Safety escorted them to the shore and stood by politely while eeGanan cringed in horror and Darzek attempted to decipher the marks left by Kermz's fierce struggle for life. He had clawed deep furrows in the sand and clutched rocks until his hands were torn away, leaving streaks of blood and shreds of drying flesh. There were also strange, crisscrossing lines such as Darzek had never seen before, as well as a set of hoof prints identified by the official as those of the *narron*, a small native herbivore that pastured along the shore.

"Are you certain it was Kermz?" Darzek asked.

The official produced his evidence: Kermz's well-filled money pouch with identification, pieces of cloth ripped from clothing he was known to have been wearing, one slipper, custom made, identified as his, and a pair of night glasses bearing his name.

Darzek looked about him uneasily. The sea lay flat to the horizon, a glimmering mirror faintly blood-stained by the red glow of the morning sun. The beach area was a mere fifty meters wide, and behind it a perpendicular wall of stone and cement, more than two meters high, followed the curve of the coast to infinity. Widely spaced stone stiles made the beach accessible, but no one seemed to be using them. Beyond the wall loomed the stubby skyline of Port Gmorff, and the bustling city sounds were sharply punctuated by the cries of sea birds wheeling overhead. In all of that length of desolate beach, nothing moved except themselves.

"Are we in danger now?" Darzek asked.

"The gods never rise in daylight," the official said.

"Gods?"

The official shrugged. "Things, creatures, monsters—on Gmorff the gods have never cared what they were called."

"Do you lose many citizens to them?"

"Virtually none. One has only to avoid the beaches at night."

"Why are there no signs warning people away?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Everyone knows!"

"*I* didn't know," Darzek said. "Obviously Kermz didn't know. Your government must assume full responsibility for this tragedy because of its failure to post warnings. With your large numbers of visitors and immigrants, it's surprising that there haven't been many such misadventures. The consulate will insist on immediate remedial action."

"There's no reason for a decent citizen to come here at night," the official protested. "Kermz's reputation was such that on public streets he risked attack by vengeful husbands and fathers."

Darzek moved off along the shore following Kermz's footprints, and eeGanan and the official stumbled after him. The footprints ultimately led to a stile, and atop the wall near the stile was a large white stone. Darzek turned and walked in the opposite direction for several kilometers. The sea remained placid, birds continued to wheel, and whatever unmentionable shapes the waters concealed kept their peace.

He found a second white stone and climbed a stile to check his location. "Kermz planned his route in advance," he said. "There aren't any location markings along the beach, so he used white stones. They'd be easily visible with night glasses. Some lass in the Sorfz Deme waited in vain for a visitor last night."

eeGanan mopped his face and uttered a wheeze of relief. "Death by misadventure?" Darzek nodded.

eeGanan wrote his report and then suggested a tentative solution to Darzek's mystery. The sea monsters were sometimes referred to as gods, and at long intervals they doubtless claimed human victims. Supreme must have construed these unfortunate individuals to be human sacrifices. Without enthusiasm Darzek passed the suggestion to Supreme, and Supreme responded with a request for more data. Darzek had the happy notion of compiling a list of human victims of the gods and discovered to his disgust that Gmorffian vital statistics lumped together deaths by misadventure without specifying causes.

While he was attempting to plumb the jumbled statistics, eeGanan entered his office and glumly indicated a name on the passenger list of an arriving interstellar liner. "Serna Kermz," he groaned. "She's from Miloz. Kermz was from Miloz. She'll be a relative and no end of trouble."

Darzek cheerfully agreed. "She'll want to visit the scene of his death, and you'll have to explain what he was doing there and answer all sorts of questions." eeGanan's mouth drooped further. "I'll call on her," Darzek said. "I'm now convinced that this mystery will never be solved with statistics." He was still enjoying Gmorff and unconcerned about how long his mission might take. If Supreme wanted him, Supreme knew where he was.

He found Serna Kermz and her large retinue of servants established

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in a huge old chateau far beyond the cluttered confines of Port Gmorff. To call on her he'd borrowed eeGanan's badge of office, and he entrusted the baton to the servant who admitted him and was left waiting amidst glittering, inlaid furniture and costly, unidentifiable bric-a-brac.

A child entered shyly. "Yes?"

"I wanted to see Serna Kermz."

"I'm Serna Kermz."

She met Darzek's eyes so calmly that he blushed. "I'm from the Interworld Consulate," he said apologetically. "A short time ago we had an Arso Kermz in residence, and I was wondering—"

"He was my brother."

She was a charming child, with a perfect oval face, olive-tinted complexion, and large, grave eyes, and when she grew up she would doubtless be as handsome as her brother had been.

"I am performing a hadj to my brother's death place," she said.

Darzek murmured sympathy at the unfortunate necessity for such a pilgrimage. "If the consulate can do anything to make your stay here—" He had been about to say "a happier one," but he swallowed those words and lamely continued, "Anything to assist you—" Belatedly he was remembering the diplomat's prime maxim: If you can't think of anything to say, shut up! Before the silence actually became awkward he mastered a few platitudes and took his leave.

"That child," he told eeGanan, "is here all alone with her servants, and the hadj isn't even native to her world, it's just something she's read about. What kind of a family is it that'll indulge such a childish whim?"

"What does she propose to do?"

"I didn't think to ask. Visit the beach and offer prayers, I suppose."

"I'll inform the authorities and ask them to make certain that she doesn't go to the beach at night. Otherwise, it's hardly a matter for the consulate to intervene in, is it?"

"No," Darzek said. "I suppose not."

Darzek and eeGanan quickly forgot the child, and she, her whim satisfied, doubtless would have made an anonymous return to Miloz had not fate intervened. A Thing-from-the-Sea claimed another victim.

An unfortunate young man named Klo Lya, from the world of Ronaq, had fallen in love with a native girl. The girl's family forbade the match, shipped her off to relatives on a neighboring world, and finally informed Lya that she had died. Officials were uncertain as to whether he went to the beach courting death or whether his grief made him oblivious to the recently posted warnings.

Because Lya was an alien, eeGanan had another report to write. In the company of the same official they visited the shore, and the first thing Darzek noticed at the scene of the tragedy was Serna Kermz with an escort of male servants. She stood

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

huddled against the wall, and her eyes were wide with horror.

The evidence was similar to that found after Kermz's death—the blood, the shreds of flesh clinging to rocks, the pathetic, clawed furrows in the sand, the scattering of personal effects, the crisscrossing lines, even a meandering set of *narron* tracks. If Lya had courted death, he had not welcomed it in the guise in which it found him.

Darzek indicated Serna Kermz to the official. "Can't you get her away from here?"

"Why?" the official asked in surprise. "The beach is a public place."

Darzek explained tersely, and the official shrugged and said he was very sorry if the little girl was frightened, but in that case she was free to leave. Anyone who wished to make holy offerings had the legal right to do so, and doubtless there would be religious ceremonies on the spot all during the day. As long as the child conducted herself with propriety, no one had the right to interfere with her.

"*Religious* ceremonies?" Darzek echoed.

"When one of the gods rises, many congregations come to worship."

"This," Darzek said, "I've got to see."

eeGanan returned to the consulate to write his report, and Darzek seated himself on the wall and waited. Time passed, the sun traced a high, hot path overhead, and his curiosity began to wane. Finally a religious procession arrived. Boy novices in baggy pantaloons, their shaven heads gleaming in the sun, erected a wood stile at the scene of the tragedy, and the procession mounted it. Bearded priests in robes that bore occult symbols lead the way, spreading pungent incense on the tart sea breeze. The congregation, men, women and children in gay holiday dress, followed them, milling about uncertainly while one worshiper after another prostrated himself on the shore and allowed the waves to lap over him.

Before Darzek finally tired of their antics and left, he looked again at Serna Kermz. She'd forgotten her fright and was watching with interest.

He saw her again a week later, in a holiday religious procession. She wore a long, flowing gown and walked demurely with the girl novices—incongruously followed by her retinue of servants.

eeGanan said blankly, "*Water Believers?* I don't know anything about Water Believers." He turned to his file and tapped out a request for information. "There are so many religious sects, so many water sects," he said.

"I know," Darzek said. "And all of them postulate some kind of afterlife in a rather damp paradise. This particular sect is the one the Kermz girl joined."

"There wasn't anything improper about that," eeGanan protested. "I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

looked into it at the time. If a sect accepts aliens and if the aliens want to join, it's perfectly legal."

"It better not be legal in this case. I've finally found the reference to human sacrifices that I've been looking for, and this is the religious sect that practices it."

eeGanan stared at him.

"On the monthly anniversary of Kermz's death," Darzek went on grimly, "that child is going to commemorate the occasion by sacrificing herself to the gods. How do we stop it?"

eeGanan turned and tapped out another request. When the answers came, they quickly cleared away the excess verbiage and contemplated the bedrock of Supreme's inviolable principles: Local laws allowed complete freedom of religion, even where aliens were concerned. The consulate was forbidden to contravene local law concerning religion. A voluntary action could not be considered human sacrifice.

The Kermz child was offering herself voluntarily. It would be a religious ceremony. They could do nothing about it.

Darzek immediately sent off a report by high-priority relay, asking Supreme to intervene. While they waited for a reply, eeGanan occupied himself with a search for a useful legal precedent, and Darzek spent the time attempting to find out as much as he could about Gmorffian water religions. He found the situation far worse than he'd supposed.

Gmorff was a world with warm, shallow seas teeming with life, all of it sternly protected. The only available sea foods were imported. There were lovely sea beaches but no bathing, no water recreation. There were no boats! The seas belonged to the gods, and although the natives who still worshiped sea monsters were now a small minority, their religions, as eeGanan glumly confirmed, had formidable legal guarantees that went back to the beginnings of history on the planet.

The sea monsters were blood-suckers, and their principal victim—almost their only victim—was the small nocturnal quadruped, the *narron*, which grazed along the seashore, ate sea plants that the tide had stranded, and drank sea water. Possibly one purpose of the sea wall was to keep the *narron* penned near the shore.

On other worlds such monsters would have been studied in their lairs, but on Gmorff it would have been sacrilege to enter the sea with scientific equipment. For that reason knowledge of the monsters had to be sought in religious legend rather than scientific fact.

An offering to the gods was not a sacrifice, but a gift—a gift of living blood. "They must paralyze their victims with a poisonous bite or sting," Darzek said. "The only scientific discussion I can find—which is pure speculation, since no one is permitted to do research—suggests that the victim is enclosed in a special secretion that hardens into an air bubble and in this way is kept

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

live under the sea so that the monster can have periodic blood snacks."

"But the marks on the beach," eeGanan protested, shuddering. "If the victims were paralyzed, how could they struggle?"

"As I said, it's part legend and part pure guess. Maybe the poison takes time to take effect. Anyway, according to the legendary part of it, the victim is kept alive for precisely one year, and if on any monthly anniversary a substitute victim is offered to the gods on the same spot from which the first was taken, the gods will effect a trade. The first victim will be returned alive, and the substitute offering accepted in his place."

"I see. The child is offering herself in the hope that Kermz will be returned to life."

Darzek nodded.

"What incredible nonsense!"

"Not at all. There are several well-documented tests of the legend—all legendary, of course. There's a pathetic tale of young lovers—the boy was taken by the gods; the girl was inconsolable and redeemed him by offering herself; and then the boy was inconsolable and redeemed the girl. The two of them lived to ripe old age redeeming each other in turn and never meeting. It's a sickening legend, but it's the only sort of documentation available. Powerful religions don't document their failures."

"If Supreme won't act, what can we do?"

"We might try bribing a priest."

eeGanan looked at him with horror. "But that's—that's—"

"Morally reprehensible," Darzek said politely. "Maybe even illegal. I was joking—surely you don't think I'd stoop *that* low. As a matter of fact, I've already tried and it didn't work. The one thing we can do is insist on the letter of the law. The religious tradition says *an offering from the same spot*, and Kermz was seized at least twenty meters from the water. I wish someone would explain to me why a god would go that far up the beach to attack a large, active creature when the *narron* wade right into the sea to drink. The letter of the law. It isn't much."

"I'll keep looking for a loophole," eeGanan said wearily.

Darzek tried to see the child, but the priests were keeping her in seclusion. Without much hope he reviewed his source material, reviewed it again, and finally Supreme's answer arrived.

It was in three parts: (1) Local laws, traditions and religions must be respected. (2) Where local laws, traditions or religions conflict with accepted principles of behavior in intelligent beings, the natives should be guided toward the necessary modifications. (3) Submit more data.

Darzek swore vehemently, compiled a thorough report on Gmorfian water religions, and sent it off. Long before Supreme received it, the child's fate would be decided. He swore again and went for a walk

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

through the neighborhood near the shore.

That afternoon he rented an apartment in a building that overlooked the beach, and he bought two pairs of the best night binoculars available and an action camera with night lenses.

"If I dared," he told eeGanan, "I'd get some kind of weapon and blast to pieces any god that touches the beach. I don't dare; priests would soon find out who was responsible and the offering would be repeated next month. If I dared, I'd get some kind of weapon that would stun or hurt or otherwise irritate. I don't dare; the creature's reaction is unpredictable; it might become enraged and subject the child to unspeakable torment before killing her anyway. The one thing left for us is to witness this ourselves."

"Such weapons can't be acquired on Gmorff anyway," eeGanan observed. He thought for a moment and added, "Witnessing the tragedy should greatly facilitate the writing of reports."

At dusk the procession slowly moved toward the shore. The novices erected their stile, and the congregation marched over it to encircle the place of offering, each member holding aloft a flickering, colored fire stick. The priest went through an involved ceremony that concluded with the sprinkling of sea water on the child, who was adorned for the offering with glittering jewels and a wreath of flowers.

Fire sticks winked out one by one as the congregation remounted the stile, leaving the child seated on a circular white rug in a pose of meditation. Only the priests remained—they would spend the night beyond the wall, praying and at the same time guarding the approaches to the beach against invasion by curious atheists. In the morning they would form another procession to give thanks for Kermz's safe return and to perform an offering ceremony for the child—or so a priest had solemnly assured Darzek.

Darkness fell swiftly, and the heaving sea reflected the soft glow of a splinter of moonlight. The child, vague white image against a white background, remained motionless. At the next window eeGanan grumbled about the sleep he was missing until Darzek told him to shut up. The light breeze died down, and the sea moved in long, glassy swells.

The thing came much sooner than Darzek had expected and with breath-taking abruptness. The surface was suddenly ruffled by a softly luminescent shapelessness floating low in the water. eeGanan gasped and leaned forward. Darzek swore futilely and turned to start the camera before he raised his binoculars.

It moved toward the beach in slow jerks of propulsion, and in shallow water it suddenly reared upward and assumed a shape. eeGanan sobbed in terror, and Darzek dug his nails into the soft wood of the window ledge. The

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

nstrous, pulsating thing hauled lf onto the beach waving a ltitude of bristling limbs and wly slithered toward the sleeping ld. It was rearing above her, ring its limbs speculatively, when dripping slime awakened her. bably she screamed, but at that tance the horror unfolded as a alyzing dumb show with the only nds being the soft moans of anan's breathing. The child iled her arms, but she made no ier effort to escape.

Then the thing collapsed and wly edged backward, leaving the ild untouched. It reached the ter and slid from sight. Only a irling whirlpool and the wet trail the beach marked its passage.

The child lay motionless; probab- she'd fainted.

"We should go to her," Darzek id bitterly, "but the priests won't low anyone near her before orning."

They took turns watching until wn. The remainder of the night ssed tediously, for which Darzek lt profoundly grateful. At first light e religious procession wended its ay to the beach, and the child nned ordinary clothing and left.

The following day Darzek went to e her. She seemed none the worse r her experience. "Silly old priest," e said. "It wasn't a god, it was a sty beast. It dripped on me. Ugh!"

"What are you going to do now?"

"I'm going home tomorrow."

Darzek said fervently, "That unds like an excellent idea."

He personally saw her party to the ship, and then he wrote a complete report for Supreme and placed a copy of it, along with the film, in the consulate file. He said to eeGanan, "The next step is to find a way to guide the natives toward more reasonable conduct while fully respecting their local laws, traditions and religions. For a veteran consul like you, it ought to be simple. Let me know when you do."

There were the Sea Drinkers, who at least had the good sense not to perform their ceremonies at night. There were the God Feeders, a diminishing congregation dedicated to offering the gods an enormous native animaloid monstrosity that had become rare and hence prohibitively expensive. The God Feeders interested Darzek because one authority stated that they carried pictures of the gods in their processions; so he tracked down a congregation and examined its banners. The crude paintings bore no similarity whatsoever to the sea monster Darzek knew, and the God Feeders were anyway a pathetic group, doomed to extinction because they were unable to adapt, to offer the gods a food more readily available.

And there were others—Water Worshipers, and Water Healers, and the Devout of the Tides. Not to mention Wave Pietists and Shore Faithful and the Sanctified of the Mist. For a time Darzek amused himself by inventing a new name and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

then asking the file if there was such a religious congregation. There always was.

There were daily religious processions through Port Gmorff. Previously Darzek had not recognized them as such, because they looked like groups of ordinary people moving from one place to another. Only a few congregations had distinctive costumes even for their priests or performed public rituals. One group seemed very much like another, and the differences in their doctrines, no doubt vast chasms to the initiates, were almost undetectable to Darzek.

Darzek studied and attempted to classify the different sects, he watched their processions, and when he could he humbly asked their priests for instruction. He also went to a zoologist for information about the *narron,* the animals that lived along the shore, and to learn something of the *sporvo,* the strange beast that figured in the ritual of the God Feeders. He was learning more and more about less and less, and he knew it.

After a particularly farfetched expedition in quest of botanical information concerning the principal religious prop of the Brethren of the Sea Grass, he returned to the consulate and found eeGanan waiting for him impatiently.

"Come! I want to show you something!"

He would say nothing more. He led Darzek to an unfamiliar building, and they had entered it and walked some distance along a corridor before Darzek realized that he was in hospital.

The small amphitheater wa crowded with spectators, and th center of attention was a comatos deathly pale young man whose bod was covered with dark, circular welt

eeGanan led Darzek aside. "It Klo Lya," he said. "His sweethear decided to offer herself. The priest of the Water Believers swor everyone to secrecy and forbade he to tell even her own family. They found out about our observatio post, and they think it was our faul that the gods rejected their las offering. They took the girl to the beach after dark last night, and this morning she was gone and Lya was floating in the surf, still encased in the god's secreted bubble just as the legend foretells. Now it's being proclaimed all over Port Gmorff. Membership in the Water Believers will probably triple."

"What about Lya?"

"The doctors think he'll recover. His metabolism was slowed almost to zero, but transfusions have perked him up, and he should soon regain consciousness. He probably won't remember anything."

"I should hope not!" Darzek exclaimed.

"And as soon as he's recovered, I suppose he'll insist on offering himself to redeem the girl. We'll have a re-enactment of the legendary romance."

"No," Darzek said thoughtfully. "No, we won't have that."

"What do you mean?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I mean I see a glimmer. The problem is that I've been approaching this situation like a scholar, which I am not and never was. I should have approached it like a detective, which at least I used to be."

"What's a detective?" eeGanan wanted to know.

"In galactic society, an extremely rare kind of person."

Darzek had been functioning like a detective for two days when eeGanan suddenly manifested curiosity and decided to accompany him. They walked the shore for an hour before Darzek found what he was looking for—a herd of the *narron*, the small herbivores that were kept there for the gods to prey on. Darzek finally located them by accidently stepping on one—they spent the day burrowed into the sand, and their smooth, mottled wool coats looked like rocks. The *narron* squealed, and Darzek hauled it out. It was the size of a dog, but its disposition was definitely sheep-like—it squealed piteously all the time he examined it.

"What are you looking for?" eeGanan asked finally.

"The last link," Darzek said.

"I ran the film again."

"So did I."

"Did you notice something floating offshore that looks like a large bubble?"

"Of course."

"Kermz?"

"What else?"

"The god brought him to make the exchange for the child. Why did it renege?"

"Look!" Darzek said. "Some of the *narron* have wool growing in uneven tufts. There's scar tissue underneath."

"So? That's what they're here for. Food for the gods."

Darzek released the *narron*, and it scooted into its hole. "That's a very poetic expression," he said.

"The God Feeders are having a big procession and ceremony tomorrow. They've managed to get hold of a *sporvo*. It's the first procession they've had in all the years I've been here."

"I've seen a *sporvo*," Darzek said shortly.

"Aren't you going to watch? They've announced that they'll feed the god that took Lya's sweetheart so it'll return her."

"That's interesting. Is there any other sect that has a tradition of nonhuman offerings?"

"I don't know of any. The other sects are angry, especially the Water Believers. I wonder where they got the *sporvo*. It must have cost a lot of money."

"I'll watch their parade," Darzek said, "but I'm not going to sit up all night over a *sporvo*. Now run along. You've been very helpful to me, and I'll certainly commend you to Supreme. In all honesty, though, I'll have to say that you're better equipped to be a scholar than a detective."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Near the sea wall, an official was patiently explaining to two priests of the Water Believers that the shore belonged to all religions and that the God Feeders could make an offering wherever they chose. Further, the alleged representation of the god was an important part of their ceremony. If members of other religious sects found it offensive, they did not have to look.

"Interesting point," Darzek remarked. "Where the law guarantees the practices of all religions, the rights of any one religion have to stop where the rights of another begin. Here comes the procession!"

First came a pair of priests in ordinary clothing bearing a huge banner. Behind them was the *sporvo*, with a priest leading it by a rope tied around its snout. It was not precisely correct to say that the priest led it, for the beast moved by lunges and the priest by dodges. A group of masked novice priests armed with sharp sticks surrounded the *sporvo* and attempted to keep it lunging in the right direction. Periodically the *sporvo* would sit down on the pavement, blow bubbles through its periscope-like snout, and flap its protruding eyes while producing a pandemonium of noises. When that happened the novice priests would instantly rush to it and push on the creature's humped rear until they got it in motion again. The small congregation straggled along unnoticed.

The novice priests wore ridiculously oversized clothing, and the antics they performed as they urge the *sporvo* forward had the specta tors convulsed. The *sporvo* was a comical a creature as the galaxy ha produced, and the mere prospect o seeing one had produced the larges street crowd that eeGanan coul remember. The spectators screame with laughter, but there were alsc moments of abrupt, horrified silenc as the leading priests swung thei banner this way and that, for i carried a quite realistic painting of ar unfortunate *sporvo* lying on the se shore with a god rearing its bristlin multiple limbs above it, ready tc pounce.

The novice priests spent the remainder of the afternoon in gettin the *sporvo* over the sea wall or ramps. Long before they finished the job, most of the citizens had laughec themselves into a state of prostratior and gone home. eeGanan returned tc the consulate, and Darzek, for the want of anything else to do, went tc his hostel and began packing.

eeGanan charged in on him late the next morning and found him stil in bed. "They did it!" he gasped.

"I know. I changed my mind and watched."

"The gods accepted the *sporvo* and returned the girl!"

"I know."

"Tonight the God Feeders are going to make another offering. Fo Kermz!"

"I know. He probably isn't worth the trouble, and it may be too late anyway—he ought to be almos exsanguinated by now—but at leas

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the legend about the gods keeping their victims alive for a year will be blasted."

eeGanan was panting with excitement. He brushed aside Darzek's comments and continued with a rush. "The God Feeders have a new banner. It's an enormously enlarged photograph of the god taking the *sporvo*. All of the other water religions are horrified."

"They're more than that. They're having cataclysmic conniptions, and they can't do a thing about it because what's sacrilege to them is properly registered doctrine to the God Eaters. Now listen carefully. I'm leaving tomorrow. I have a report ready to file, but I want to make certain that you understand it. The first point is that each of these sea monsters has its own territory—its own personal stretch of beach."

"How do you know that?"

"By being a detective. Otherwise, it wouldn't always release a victim at the point where it takes it. Even legends have little grains of truth. The second point is that the monsters *always* have a victim of some sort, and when they take a new victim, they have to abandon the old one, which floats ashore. Normally the victim is one of the *narron*, and there were *narron* tracks where both Kermz and Lya were taken. Evidently natural selection has produced a creature that can survive exsanguination, since so many of the *narron* have scars. The third point is that a god cursed with a stomach is naturally gluttonous, and a glutton always prefers the largest meal available. That's why the gods take humans whenever they can get them."

"How did you find that out?"

"By being a detective. It's also the reason the god wouldn't exchange Kermz for his sister—no god would abandon a large, juicy man in order to capture a thin child. It's also why the god released Lya's sweetheart and drooled so enthusiastically over the *sporvo*. Other things being approximately equal, as with two humans, the god will take the freshest victim."

eeGanan was regarding him with consternation. "All of that about the God Feeders—you made it up! Why, that's—that's—"

"I did not, and it's perfectly legal. I merely revived a dying religion, and all it took was a little solvency. I didn't use a thing except what was already in the sect's doctrine and properly registered. The God Feeders believe in representations of the gods, and they believe that when the gods take a human victim it signifies god-hunger and that the gods should be fed at once with the largest available animal. It's an astonishingly sound doctrine. The other sects never objected before because the representations were rather insipid and it never occurred to the God Feeders to offer a *sporvo* on the precise spot where a human victim had been taken. Now all of Gmorff is going to know exactly what the gods look like. It only goes to show that gods should watch their table manners

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

even when they think they're dining privately. The citizens are likely to get the idea that gods drool just as enthusiastically over human offerings. Any questions?"

eeGanan could only stare at him.

"If there should be another human victim," Darzek went on, "the consulate must provide funds immediately so that the God Feeders can redeem him with a *sporvo*. In addition there should be an allowance for twice-yearly offerings even when there is no victim. It's just a bonus for us that the largest available animal is also the funniest, and we should take advantage of it. We can poke fun at water religions and also display the gods in their most horrific moments. Any questions?"

"There'll be another procession this afternoon."

"I've already made arrangements for that. The crowd will be bigger than yesterday. Not only are the God Feeders entertaining, but their doctrine is a sensational success."

"You'll leave written instructions and an authorization for future expenditures?"

"Of course."

"Very well. I think I understand. Are you coming to see the procession?"

"I think not. I have to finish packing, and I have one or two personal matters to attend to."

"Yes. Very well. As you said, the God Feeders were marvelously entertaining. Considering that they had not held a procession in all of my time on Gmorff, they did extremely well."

He left, and Darzek resumed his packing. He had only one more detail to take care of, and that was to appoint a high priest for the God Feeders, someone to manage the group's affairs and arrange its ceremonials. He had planned on leaving those tasks to eeGanan, but he'd had a stern second thought. He had misgivings as to how the consul would react if he knew that the priests and novices and most of the congregation had been hired through the Port Gmorff actors' guild.

IMPORTANT NOTICE ABOUT PRICE INCREASE

As this issue was going to press, the wage-price freeze was announced. The single copy increase announced last month could not be changed; for one thing, the covers with the new prices had already been printed. Also, we felt that the increase was justified based on the increase in editorial pages. However, we have decided to rescind the increase in subscription prices, and we will continue to accept subscriptions at the old rates of $7.00 for one year, $12.00 for two years and $17.00 for three years. If you use the coupon on page 100, cross out the new rates and insert the old.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BAIRD SEARLES

FILMS

THIS MONTH, TWO FILMS, OSTENSIBLY for children. . hell, they are for children, but books and films aimed at children have accounted for some of the best fantasy ever created, though movies have ever had a habit of making sow's ears out of silk purses in that department by giving the kids what they ought to want rather than what they do want.

Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory (Paramount) is a dandy example of the genre of live action, cutesy musical adaptations of classic children's literature which started with *The Wizard of Oz* and was revived by the success of *Mary Poppins*. It is worth considering only because of the potential of some spectacular or sensitive special effects, such as the first glimpse of the Emerald City and the flight of the winged monkeys in *Wizard*, or the Bird Women in *Mary Poppins*, those all too rare moments when the eye is convinced of fantasy. But there's not a one in *Willie Wonka*, despite the evidence that almost all the budget went into creating the magical chocolate factory of chocolate waterfalls, bubbling fountains of soda, giant geese laying golden eggs, and a staff of orange dwarfs (a la Munchkins, a distasteful device). It's all very heavy handed and literal, giving a kind of visual ptomaine like the second act of *Nutcracker*. And for God's sake, don't see it stoned.

Roald Dahl, responsible for the screenplay as well as the original

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

book, has done some good chiller writing for adults; this is a classic example of what happens when a good writer starts moralizing and writing down.

Beatrix Potter, on the other hand, didn't write down to anybody. Her books for children, very young children really, have the air of genius, and her illustrations of her anthropomorphic animal folk unnervingly combine zoological correctness and inhuman individuality. . .they are anything but just cute. Her work has come to the screen in an unlikely way in the awkwardly titled **Peter Rabbit and Tales of Beatrix Potter** (MGM), in which several of the more famous stories are presented as live action ballets. In one way, this works; voices for humanized animals are seldom successful, while the movement devised here is as half human, half animal as the characters. Nevertheless, I can't quite imagine who will really like this film. Potter fans will admire the incredible fidelity of the costumes and masks (devised by Rotislav Doboujinsky, and they're amazing), but will correctly complain that the stories don't come over too well. Ballet buffs will find it none too interesting as choreography—as a long time balletomane I feel qualified to advance that opinion. Children will find it a tedious hour and a half sans dialogue, and with long stretches of solo dances of dubious fascination.

Nevertheless, there are those moments of visual fantasy which almost justify the whole thing. In one in particular, three costumed mouse couples perform a minuet-like *pas de six* on a parquet floor before a half open door leading to another unseen room. It is filmed from "mouse level" and everything is to scale; the "mice" barely come to the wainscot. Usually when this kind of miniaturization is well done on screen, I still think of how cleverly the designer has devised that giant set. In this case, eye believed. . .totally convinced I was seeing tiny beings on a real floor. There was that total verisimilitude which is so rarely achieved in screen fantasy. Another moment, almost equally real, was a lady hedgehog hurrying down an English country lane, looking both like an old peasant woman and an animal with that odd business-like but inhuman movement quality that beasts have when they are on an errand. I think Beatrix Potter would have liked those moments; I did.

No-regrets-department. . .I'm not reviewing the third Planet of the Apes movie because I loathed the other two so thoroughly. *Book department*. . .note publication of *Science Fiction Film* by Denis Gifford (Dutton Paperback), an almost too illustrated history of the field which I'll devote some time to next month if nothing else comes up. No late, late show department this month because TV pickings have been poor. Apologies to those who have written their approval of that kind of retrospective review. I'll try to stay up later this month.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In our April 1970 issue we introduced Fritz Leiber's famous characters Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser to those of our readers who had not been fortunate enough to meet them elsewhere. The story, "Ill Met in Lankhmar," subsequently won the Science Fiction Writers of America Nebula award for best novella of the year. We've been promising a further adventure of Fafhrd and the Mouser, and here it is.

The Price of Pain Ease

by FRITZ LEIBER

A TALL SWORDSMAN AND A small one strode out the Marsh Gate of Lankhmar and east along Causey Road. They were youths by their skin and suppleness, men by their expressions of deep-bitten grief and stony purpose.

The sleepy guardsmen in browned-iron cuirasses did not question them. Only madmen and fools willingly leave the grandest city in the world of Nehwon, especially at dawn and afoot. Besides, these two looked extremely dangerous.

Ahead the sky was bright pink, like the bubbling rim of a great crystal goblet brimmed with effervescent red wine for delight of the gods, while the paler pink glow rising therefrom drove the last stars west. But before the sun could glare one scarlet sliver above the horizon, a black storm came racing out of the north over the Inner Sea—a sea squall making landfall. It grew dark again almost as night, except when the lightning stabbed and the thunder shook his great iron shield. The storm wind carried the salty tang of the sea commingled with the foul reek of the marsh. It bent the green swords of the sea grass flat and lashed into writhing the arms of the thorn and seahawk trees. It pushed black swamp water a yard up the northern side of the narrow, serpentine, flat-topped ridge that was Causey Road. Then came pelting rain.

The two swordsmen made no comment to each other and did not alter their movements, except to lift their shoulders and faces a little and slant the latter north, as if they

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

welcomed the storm's cleansing and sting and what tiny distraction it brought to some deep agony of mind and heart.

"Ho, Fafhrd!" a deep voice grated above the thunder's growl and the wind's roar and the rattle of the rain.

The tall swordsman turned his head sharply south.

"Hist, Gray Mouser!"

The small swordsman did likewise.

Close by the southern side of the road a rather large, rounded hut stood on five narrow posts. The posts had to be tall, for Causey Road ran high here, yet the floor of the hut's low, rounded doorway looked straight at the tall swordsman's head.

This was nothing very strange, except that all men know that none dwell in the venomous Great Salt Marsh, save for giant worms, poison eels, water cobras, pale spindle-legged swamp rats, and the like.

Blue lightning glared, revealing with great clarity a hooded figure crouched inside the low doorway. Each fold and twist of the figure's draperies stood out as precisely as in an iron engraving closely viewed.

But the lightning showed nothing whatsoever inside the hood, only inky blackness.

Thunder crashed.

Then from the hood the grating voice recited the following lines, harshly and humorlessly hammering out the words, so that what was light verse became a dismal and doomful incantation:

Ho, Fafhrd tall!
Hist, Mouser small!
Why leave you the city
Of marvelous parts?
It were a great pity
To wear out your hearts
And wear out the soles of your feet,
Treading all earth,
Foregoing all mirth,
Before you once more Lankhmar greet.
Now return, now return, now!

This doleful ditty was three quarters done before the two swordsmen realized that they were striding along steadily all this while and the hut still abreast them. So it must be walking along with them on its posts, or legs rather. And now that they were aware of this, they could see those five thin wooden members swinging and knee-bending.

When the grating voice ceased to speak on that last great "now," Fafhrd halted.

So did the Mouser.

So did the hut.

The two swordsmen turned toward the low doorway, facing it.

Simultaneously with a deafening thunderclap, a great bolt of lightning struck close behind them. It jolted their bodies, shocked their flesh thrillingly and painfully, and it illumined the hut and its dweller brighter than day, yet still revealed nothing inside the dweller's hood.

If the hood had been empty, the draperies at its back would have been shown clearly. But, no, there was only that oval of ebon darkness, which even the levinbolt could not illumine.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

As unmoved by this prodigy as by he thunderstroke, Fafhrd bellowed above the storm toward the doorway, his voice sounding tiny to himself in his thunder-smitten ears, 'Hear me, witch, wizard, nightgaunt, whatever you are! I shall never in my life enter again the foul city which has stolen from me my dearest and only love, the incomparable and irreplaceable Vlana, for whom I shall forever grieve and for whose unspeakable death I shall forever feel guilt. The Thieves' Guild slew her for her freelance thieving—and we slew the slayers, though it profited us nothing at all."

"Likewise I shall never lift foot toward Lankhmar again," the Gray Mouser took up from beside him in a voice like an angry trumpet, "the loathy metropolis which horribly bereft me of my beloved Ivrian, even as Fafhrd was bereft and for similar reason, and left me loaded with an equal weight of sorrow and shame, which I shall bear forever, even past my perishing." A salt spider as big as a platter sailed close by his ear in the grip of the gale, kicking its thick, corpse-white legs, and veered off past the hut, but the Mouser did not start in the least, and there was no break whatever in his words as he continued, "Know, being of blackness, haunter of the dark, that we slew the foul wizard who murdered our loves and killed his two rodentine familiars and mauled and terrorized his employers at Thieves' House. But revenge is empty. It cannot bring back the dead. It cannot assuage by one atom the grief and guilt we shall feel forever for our darlings."

"Indeed it cannot," Fafhrd seconded loudly, "for we were drunk when our darlings died, and for that there is no forgiveness. We highjacked a small treasure in gems from thieves of the Guild, but we lost the two jewels beyond price and without compare. And we shall never return to Lankhmar!"

Lightning shone from behind the hut and thunder crackled. The storm was moving inland, south from the road.

The hood that held darkness drew back a little and slowly shook from side to side, once, twice, thrice. The harsh voice intoned, fainter because Fafhrd's and the Mouser's ears were still somewhat deafened and a-ring from that father of thunderstrokes:

Never and forever are neither for men.

You'll be returning again and again.

Then the hut was moving inland too on its five spindly legs. It turned around, so that its door faced away from them, and its speed increased, its legs moving as nimbly as those of a cockroach, and was soon lost amongst the tangle of thorn and seahawk trees.

So ended the first encounter of the Mouser and his comrade Fafhrd with Sheelba of the Eyeless Face.

Later that day the two swordsmen waylaid an insufficiently guarded merchant Lankhmar-bound, depriving him of the best two of his four

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cart-horses—for thieving was first nature to them—and on these clumping mounts made their way out of the Great Salt Marsh and across the Sinking Land to the sinister hub-city of Ilthmar with its treacherous little inns and innumerable statues and bas-reliefs and other depictions of its rat-god. There they changed their clumsy horses for camels and were soon humping south across the desert, following the eastern shore of the turquoise Sea of the East. They crossed the River Tilth in dry season and continued on through the sands, bound for the Eastern Lands, where neither of them had previously traveled. They were searching for distraction in strangeness and intended first to visit Horborixen, citadel of the King of Kings and city second only to Lankhmar in size, antiquity, and baroque splendor.

For the next three years, the Years of Leviathan, the Roc, and the Dragon, they wandered the world of Nehwon south, east, north, and west, seeking forgetfulness of their first great loves and their first great guilts, and finding neither.

They lived by thievery, robbery, bodyguarding, brief commissions as couriers and agents—commissions they always, or almost always, fulfilled punctiliously—and by showmanship, the Mouser entertaining by legerdemain, juggling, and buffoonery, while Fafhrd, with his gift for tongues and training as a Singing Skald, excelled at minstrelsy, translating the legends of his frigid homeland into many languages. They never worked as cooks, clerks, carpenters, tree-fellers, or common servants; and they never, never, never enlisted as mercenary soldiers.

They acquired new scars and skills, comprehensions and compassions, cynicisms and secrecies—a laughter that lightly mocked and a cool poise that tightly crusted all inner miseries and most of the time hid the barbarian in Fafhrd and the slum boy in the Mouser. They became outwardly merry, uncaring, and cool, but their grief and guilt stayed with them, the ghosts of Ivrian and Vlana haunting their sleeping and their waking dreams, so that they had little commerce with other girls, and that more a discomfort than a joy. Their comradeship became firmer than rock, stronger than steel, but all other human relations were fleeting. Melancholy was their commonest mood, though mostly hid even from each other.

Came noon of the Day of the Mouse in the Month of the Lion in the Year of the Dragon. They were taking their siesta in the cool of a cave near Ilthmar. Outside, heat shimmered above hard-baked ground and scanty brown grass, but here was most pleasant. Their horses, a gray mare and a chestnut gelding, found shade in the cavern's mouth. Fafhrd had sketchily inspected the place for serpents but discovered none. He loathed the cold, scaly ones of the south, so different from the hot-blooded, fur-bearing snakes of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the Cold Waste. He went a little way into a narrow, rocky corridor leading from the back of the cave under the small mountain in which it was set, but returned when light failed and he had found neither reptiles nor end.

They rested comfortably on their uncurled bedrolls. Sleep would not come to them, so idle talk did. By slow stages this talk became serious. Finally the Gray Mouser summed up the last trinity of years.

"We have searched the wide world over and not found forgetfulness."

"I dispute that," Fafhrd countered. "Not the latter part, for I am still as ghost-locked as you, but we have not crossed the Outer Sea and hunted over the great continent legend will have in the west."

"I believe we have," the Mouser disputed. "Not the former part, I'll agree, and what purpose in searching the sea? But when we went our farthest east and stood on the shore of that great ocean, deafened by its vast surf, I believe we stood on the western coast of the Outer Sea with nothing between us and Lankhmar but wild water."

"What great ocean?" Fafhrd demanded. "And what vast surf? It was a lake, a mere puddle with some ripples in it. I could readily see the opposite shore."

"Then you were seeing mirages, and languishing in one of those moods when all Nehwon seems but a small bubble you could burst with flick of fingernail."

"Perhaps," Fafhrd agreed. "Oh, how weary I am of this life."

There was a little cough, no more than a clearing of throat, in the dark behind them. They did not otherwise move, but their hair stirred at its roots, so close and intimate had been that tiny noise, and so indicative of intelligence rather than mere animality, because of a measuredly attention-asking quality about it.

Then as one they turned head over shoulder and looked at the black mouth of the rocky corridor. After a bit it seemed to each of them that he could see seven small, faint green glows swimming in the dark there and lazily changing position, like seven fireflies hovering, but with their light steadier and far more diffuse, as if each firefly wore a cloak made of several layers of gauze.

Then a voice sugary and unctuous, senescent though keen—a voice like a quavering flute—spoke from amidst those dimmest glows, saying, "Oh, my sons, begging the question of that hypothetical western continent, on which I do not propose to enlighten you, there is yet one place in Nehwon you have not searched for forgetfulness since the cruel deaths of your beloved girls."

"And what place may that be?" the Mouser asked softly after a long moment and with the slightest stammer. "And who are you?"

"The city of Lankhmar, my sons. Who I am, besides your spiritual father, is a private matter."

"We have sworn a great oath against ever returning to Lankhmar," Fafhrd growled, the growl low and a shade defensive.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Oaths are made to be kept only until their purpose be fulfilled," the fluty voice responded. "Every geas is lifted at last, every self-set rule repealed. Otherwise orderliness in life becomes a limitation to growth; discipline, chains; integrity, bondage and evil-doing. You have learned what you can from the world. You have graduated from that huge portion of Nehwon. It now remains that you take up your postgraduate studies in Lankhmar, highest university of civilized life here."

The seven faint glows were growing still dimmer now and drawing together, as if retreating down the corridor.

"We won't go back to Lankhmar," Fafhrd and the Mouser replied, speaking as one.

The seven glows faded altogether. So faintly the two men could barely hear it—yet hear it each did—the fluty voice inquired, "Are you afraid?" Then they heard a grating of rock, a very faint sound, yet somehow ponderous.

So ended the first encounter of Fafhrd and his comrade with Ningauble of the Seven Eyes.

After a dozen heartbeats, the Gray Mouser drew his slim, arm-and-a-half-long sword, Scalpel, with which he was accustomed to draw blood with surgical precision, and followed its glittering tip into the rocky corridor. He strode very deliberately, with a measured determination. Fafhrd went after, but more cautiously, with many a hesitation, holding the point of his heavier sword, Graywand, which he yet handled most nimbly in strife, close to the stony floor and wagging it from side to side. The seven glows in their lazy swayings and bobbings had mightily suggested to him the heads of large cobras raised up to strike. He reasoned that cave cobras, if such existed, might well be phosphorescent like abyssal eels.

They had penetrated somewhat farther under the mountainside than Fafhrd had on his first inspection—their slow pace enabling their eyes to accommodate better to the relative darkness—when with a slight, high-pitched shiver, Scalpel jarred vertical rock. Waiting without a word where they stood, their cave vision improved to the point where it became indisputable, without any more sword-testing at all, that the corridor ended where they were, wanting a hole big enough even for a speaking serpent to glide away, let alone a being rightfully capable of speech. The Mouser pressed and then Fafhrd threw his weight against the rock ahead at several points, but it held firm as purest mountain-heart. Nor had they missed any side tracks, even of the narrowest, or any pits or roof holes on the way—a point they doubly checked going out.

Back at their bedrolls, their horses still tranquilly nibbling brown grass at the cavern's mouth, Fafhrd said abruptly, "What we heard speak, it was an echo."

"How have an echo without a voice?" the Mouser demanded with peevish impatience. "As well have a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tail without a cat. I mean, a living tail."

"A small snow snake greatly resembles the animated tail of a white house cat," Fafhrd replied imperturbably. "Aye, and has just such a high, quavering cry."

"Are you suggesting—?"

"Of course not. As I imagine you do, I think there was a door somewhere in the rock, fitted so well we could not discern the junctures. We heard it shut. But before that, he—she, it, they—went through it."

"Then why babble of echoes and snow snakes?"

"It is well to consider all possibilities."

"He—she and so forth—named us sons," the Mouser mused.

"Some say the serpent is wisest, oldest, and even father of all," Fafhrd observed judiciously.

"Snakes again! Well, one thing's certain: all hold it rash folly for a man to take advice of a serpent, let alone seven."

"Yet he—consider the other pronouns spoken—had a point, Mouser. Mauger the indeterminate western continent, we have traveled all Nehwon in spider-webwise. What's left but Lankhmar?"

"Damn your pronouns! We swore never to return. Have you forgotten that, Fafhrd?"

"No, but I'm dying of boredom. Times I have sworn never again to drink wine."

"I would choke to death on Lankhmar! Her day-smokes, her night-smogs, her rats, her filth!"

"At the moment, Mouser, I care little whether I live or die, and where or when or how."

"Now adverbs and conjunctions! Bah, you need a drink!"

"We seek a deeper forgetfulness. They say to lay a ghost, go where she died."

"Aye, and be worse haunted!"

"I could not be worse haunted than now."

"To let a serpent shame us by asking, were we afraid!"

"Are we, perhaps?"

And so the argument went, with the final foreseeable result that Fafhrd and the Mouser cantered past Ilthmar to a stony stretch of shore that was a curiously abraded low precipice and waited there a day and a night for the Sinking Land to emerge with anomalous aqueous convulsions from the waters joining the Sea of the East to the Inner Sea. They swiftly and warily crossed its flinty, steaming expanse—for it was a hot, sunny day—and so again rode Causey Road, but this time back toward Lankhmar.

After their return to Lankhmar, they did for a few brief moons share a house and home, although it was a rather small and, naturally, stolen one, and the two women in it ghosts only, and its location—because of the morbid mood they also shared—most dubious and dire.

Coming one night half drunk by way of Plague Court and Bones Alley from the tavern at Cash and Whore named the Golden Lamprey to the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

one of most merry yet most evil recollection called the Silver Eel—on Dim Lane, this, halfway between Cheap and Carter—they spied behind it the still uncleared cinders and blackened, tumbled stones of the tenement where their first loves Ivrian and Vlana had, after many torments, been burned to white ashes, some atomies of whom they might even now be seeing by the murky moonlight.

Much later that night and much more drunk, they wandered north beyond the Street of the Gods to the section of the aristocrats by the Sea Wall and east of the Rainbow Palace of Lankhmar's overlord Karstak Ovartamortes. In the estate of Duke Danius, the Mouser spied through the spiked wall and now by brighter moonlight—the air there being cleansed of night-smog by the gentle north sea wind—a snug, trim, well-polished, natural wooden garden house with curvingly horned ridge-pole and beam-ends, to which abode he took a sudden extreme fancy and which he even persuaded Fafhrd to admire. It rested on six short cedar posts which in turn rested on flat rock. Nothing then must do but rush to Wall Street and the Marsh Gate, hire a brawny two-score of the inevitable nightlong idlers there with a silver coin and big drink apiece and promise of a gold coin and bigger drink to come, lead them to Danius' dark abode, pick the iron gate-lock, lead them warily in, order them heave up the garden house and carry it out—providentially without any great creakings and with no guards or watchmen appearing. In fact, the Mouser and Fafhrd were able to finish another jug of wine during their supervising. Next tightly blind-fold the two-score carriers—this was the only difficult part of the operation, requiring all the Mouser's adroit, confident cajoling and Fafhrd's easy though somewhat ominous and demanding friendliness—and guide and goad the forty of the impromptu porters as they pantingly and sweatingly carried the house south down empty Carter Street and west up Bones Alley (the garden house fortunately being rather narrow, three smallish rooms in a row) to the empty lot behind the Silver Eel, where after Fafhrd had hurled aside three stone blocks there was space to ease it down. Then it only remained to guide the still-blindfolded carriers back to the Marsh Gate, give them their gold and buy them their wine—a big jug apiece seemed wisest to blot out memory—then rush back in the pinkening dawn to buy from Braggi, the tavernmaster, the worthless lot behind the Silver Eel, reluctantly chop off with Fafhrd's fighting axe the garden house's ridgepole—and beam-horns—throw water and then disguising ashes onto the roof and walls (without thought of what evil omen this was, recalling Vlana and Ivrian), finally stagger inside and collapse into sleep on the naked floor before even looking around.

When they woke next evening, the place turned out to be quite nice

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

inside, the two end-rooms each a thick-carpeted bedroom with highly erotic murals filling the walls. The Mouser puzzled as to whether Duke Danius shared his garden concubines with a friend or else rushed back and forth between the two bedrooms all by himself. The central room was a most couth and sedate living room with several shelves of expensively bound stimulating books and a fine larder of rare jugged foods and wines. One of the bedrooms had even a copper bath tub—the Mouser appropriated that one at once—and both bedrooms had privies easily cleaned out below by a part-time and out-dwelling houseboy they hired.

The theft was highly successful; they had no trouble from Lankhmar's brown-cuirassed and generally lazy guardsmen, no trouble from Duke Danius—if he hired house spies, they botched their not-too-easy job—and for several days the Gray Mouser and Fafhrd were very happy in their new domicile, eating and drinking up Danius' fine provender, making the quick run to the Eel for extra wine, the Mouser taking two or three perfumed, soapy, oily, slow baths a day, Fafhrd going every two days to the nearest public steam bath and putting in a lot of time on the books, sharpening his already considerable knowledge of High Lankhmarese, Ilthmarish, and Quarmallian.

By slow degrees Fafhrd's bedroom became comfortably sloppy, the Mouser's quite fussily tidy and neat—it was simply their real natures expressing themselves.

After a few days Fafhrd discovered a second library, most cunningly concealed, of books dealing with nothing but death, books at complete variance with the other supremely erotic volumes. Fafhrd found them equally educational, while the Gray Mouser amused himself by picturing Duke Danius pausing to scan a few paragraphs about strangulation or Kleshite jungle-poisons while dashing back and forth between his two bedrooms and their two or more girls.

However, they didn't invite any girls to their charming new home and perhaps for a very good reason, because after half a moon or so the ghost of slim Ivrian began to appear to the Mouser and the ghost of tall Vlana to Fafhrd, both spirits perhaps raised from their remaining mineral dust drifting around-about, and even plastered on the outer walls. The girl-ghosts never spoke, even in faintest whisper, they never touched, even so much as by the brush of a single hair. Fafhrd never spoke of Vlana to the Mouser, or the Mouser to Fafhrd of Ivrian, the two girls were invariably invisible, inaudible, intangible, *yet they were there.*

Secretly from each other, each man consulted witches, witch doctors, astrologers, wizards, necromancers, fortune tellers, reputable physicians, priests even, seeking a cure for their ills (each desiring to see more of his dead girl or nothing at all), yet finding none.

Within three moons the Mouser

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and Fafhrd—very easy-amiable to each other, very tolerant on all matters, very quick to crack jokes, smiling far more than was their wont—were both rapidly going mad, as the Mouser realized one gray dawn when the instant he opened his eyes a pale, two-dimensional Ivrian at last appeared and gazed sadly at him one moment from the ceiling and then utterly vanished.

Big drops of sweat beaded his entire face and head from hairline down on all sides, his throat was acid, he gagged and retched. Then with one fling of his right arm, he threw off all his bedclothes and raced naked out of his bedroom and across the living room into Fafhrd's.

The Northerner wasn't there.

He stared at the tousled, empty bed for a long time. Then he drank at one swallow half a bottle of fortified wine. Then he brewed himself a pot of burningly hot, triple-strength gahveh. As he gulped it down, he found himself violently shivering and shaking. He threw on a wool robe and belted it tightly around him, drew on high wool boots, then still shivered and shook as he finished his still steaming gahveh.

All day long he paced the living room or sprawled in one of its big chairs, alternating fortified wine and hot gahveh, awaiting Fafhrd's return, still shaking from time to time and pulling his warm robe tighter around him.

But the Northerner never appeared.

When the windows of thin and ash-dusty horn yellowed and darkened in the late afternoon, the Mouser began to think in a more practical fashion of his plight. It occurred to him that the one sorcerer he had *not* consulted about his horrible Ivrian hang-up—just conceivably because that was the one sorcerer he believed might not be a faker and quack—was Sheelba of the Eyeless Face, who dwelt in a five-legged hut in the Great Salt Marsh immediately east of Lankhmar.

He whipped off his woolen stuff and speedily donned his gray tunic of coarsely woven silk, his ratskin boots, belted on his slim sword Scalpel and his dagger Cat's Claw (he'd early noted that Fafhrd's ordinary clothes and sword Graywand and dagger Heartseeker were gone), caught up his hooded cloak of the same material as his tunic, and fled from the dreadful little house in vast, sudden fear that Ivrian's sad ghost would appear to him again and then, without talking or touching, again vanish.

It was sunset. The houseboy from the Eel was cleaning out the privies. The Mouser asked, rather wildly and fiercely, "Seen Fafhrd today?"

The lad started back. "Yes," he said. "He rode off at dawn on a big white horse."

"Fafhrd doesn't own a horse," the Mouser said harshly and dangerously.

Again the lad started back. "It was the biggest horse I've ever seen. It had a brown saddle and harness, studded with gold."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Mouser snarled and half drew Scalpel from her mouseskin scabbard. Then, beyond the lad, he saw, twinkling and gleaming in the gloom, a huge, jet-black horse with black saddle and harness studded with silver.

He raced past the lad, who threw himself sidewise into the dirt, vaulted up onto the saddle, grasped the reins, thrust his feet into the stirrups—which hung exactly at the right height for him—and booted the horse, which instantly took off down Dim Lane, galloped north on Carter and west on the Street of the Gods—the crowd scampering out of the way—and was through the open Marsh Gate before the guards could draw back their ragged-edged pikes for a thrust or advance them as a formal barrier.

The sunset was behind, the night was ahead, damp wind was on his cheeks, and the Mouser found all of these things good.

The black horse galloped down Causey Road for sixty or so bowshots, or eighteen-score spear-casts, and then plunged off the road inland and south, so suddenly that the Mouser was almost unsaddled. But he managed to keep his seat, dodging as best he could the weaponed branches of the thorn and seahawk trees. After not more than a hundred gasping breaths, the horse came to a halt; and there facing them was Sheelba's hut, and a little above the Mouser's head the low, dark doorway and a black-robed and black-hooded figure crouched in it.

The Mouser said loudly, "What are you up to, you wizardly trickster? I know you must have sent this horse for me."

Sheelba said not a word and moved not a whit, even though his crouching position looked most uncomfortable, at least for a being with legs rather than, say, tentacles.

After a bit the Mouser demanded still more loudly, "Did you send for Fafhrd this morning? Send for him a huge white horse with a gold-studded brown harness?"

This time Sheelba started a little, though he settled himself quickly again and still spoke no word, while of course the space that should have held his face remained blacker even than his draperies.

Dusk deepened. After a much longer bit, the Mouser said in a low, broken voice, "O Sheelba, great magician, grant me a boon or else I shall go mad. Give me back my beloved Ivrian, give me her entire, or else rid me of her altogether, as if she had never been. Do either of those and I will pay any price you set."

In a grating voice like the clank of small boulders moved by a sudden surf, Sheelba said from his doorway, "Will you faithfully serve me as long as you live? Do my every lawful command? On my part, I promise not to call on you more than once a year, or at most twice, nor demand more than three moons out of thirteen of your time. You must swear to me by Fafhrd's bones and your own that, one, you will use any stratagem, no matter how shameful

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and degrading, to get me the Mask of Death from the Shadowland, and that, two, you will slay any being who seeks to thwart you, whether it be your unknown mother or the Great God himself."

After a still longer pause the Mouser said in a still smaller voice, "I promise."

Sheelba said, "Very well. Keep the horse. Ride it east past Ilthmar, the City of Ghouls, the Sea of Monsters, and the Parched Mountains until you come to the Shadowland. There search out the Blue Flame and from the seat of the throne before it, fetch me the Mask of Death. Or snatch it off Death's face, if he's at home. By the way, in the Shadowland, you will find your Ivrian. In particular, beware a certain Duke Danius, whose garden house you recently purloined, not altogether by chance, and whose death-library I imagine you have discovered and perused. This Danius person fears death more than any creature has ever in history, as recorded or recollected by man, demon, or god, and he is planning a foray into the Shadowland with no less a purpose than to slay Death himself (or herself or itself, for there even my knowledge stops) and to destroy all Death's possession, including the Mask you promised to procure me. Now, do my errand. That is all."

The numb, astounded, yet still unhappy and suspicious Mouser watched the dark doorway for as long as it took the moon to rise and silhouette herself behind the sharply angled branches of a dead seahawk tree, but Sheelba said not another word, nor made a move, while the Mouser could think of not a single sensible question to ask further. So at last he touched his heels against the flanks of the black horse, and it instantly turned round, carefully single-footed, to Causey road and there cantered east.

Meanwhile, at almost exactly the same time, since it is a good day's ride from Lankhmar across the Great Salt Marsh and the Sinking Land to the mountains behind Ilthmar, city of evil reputation, Fafhrd was having the same identical conversation and making exactly the same deal with Ningauble of the Seven Eyes in his vast and mazy cave, except that Ningauble, as was his gossipy wont, talked a thousand words to Sheelba's one, yet in the end said nothing more than Sheelba.

So the two disreputable and mostly unprincipled heroes set out for the Shadowland, the Mouser prudently following the coast road north to Sarheenmar and there cutting inland, Fafhrd recklessly riding straight northwest across the Poisoned Desert. Yet both had good luck and crossed the Parched Mountains on the same day, the Mouser taking the Northern Pass, Fafhrd the Southern.

The heavy overcast, which began at the watershed of the Parched Mountains, thickened, though not a drop of rain or atom of mist fell. Yet the air was cool and moist, and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

nourished perhaps by underground water of most distant source, thick green grass grew, and an open forest of black cedars sprang up. Herds of black antelopes and black reindeer nibbled the endless grass to a lawn, yet there were no herdsmen or human folk at all. The sky grew darker yet, almost a perpetual night, and odd low hills topped by congeries of black rock appeared. There were distant fires of many hues, thought none blue, and each vanished if you approached it, and you found no ash or other sign of it at its site. So the Mouser and Fafhrd well knew they had entered the Shadowland, death-feared by the merciless Mingols to the north, by the bone-proud, invisible-fleshed ivory Ghouls to the west, to the east by the hairless folk and bald beasts of the shrunken yet diplomatically subtle and long-enduring Empire of Eevarensee, and to the south by the King of Kings himself, who had a standing rule that instant death be the lot of any person, even his own vizier, or most favorite queen, who so much as whispered the name "Shadowland," let alone discussed the dark area in any wise.

Eventually the Mouser sighted a black pavilion and rode toward it and dismounted from his black horse and parted the silken drapes of the doorway, and there behind an ebony table, listlessly sipping white wine from a crystal goblet, in her and his favorite robe of violet silk, sat his beloved Ivrian, with an ermine wrap about her shoulders.

But her small, slender hands were death blue, the color of slate, and her face of like hue and vacant-eyed. Only her hair was as livingly glossy black as ever, though longer than the Mouser recalled, as were her fingernails.

She stared her eyes, which the Mouser now saw were faintly filmed by grainy white, and parted her black lips and said in a monotone, "It delights me beyond my powers of expression to see you, Mouser, ever-beloved, who now have risked even the horrors of the Shadowland for sake of me, yet you are alive and I am dead. Come never again to trouble me, my darlingest love. Enjoy. Enjoy."

And even as the Mouser hurled himself forward toward her, smashing to one side the frail black table, her figure grew somewhat faint and she sank swiftly into the ground as if it were diaphanous, gentle, unfeared quicksand—though solid turf when the Mouser clawed at it.

Meantime, a few Lankhmar leagues to the south, Fafhrd was suffering exactly the same experience with his dearly beloved Vlana, slate-faced and slate-handed—those dear, long, strong fingers—actress-clad in black tunic and red stockings with dark-brown hair agleam, except that before she too sank into the ground, she ended, being a rather rougher woman than Ivrian, by intoning in a voice that was most strange for being a lifeless monotone rather than the spirited accents the words implied, "and now exit fast,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

you beloved booby, sweetest man in live world or Shadowland. Do Ningauble's idiot job, which will almost certainly be your death—stupid boy—for you've most unwisely promised him. Then gallop like hell southwest. If you do die by the way and join me in the Shadowland, I'll spit in your face, never speak you a single word, and never once share your black mossy bed. That's what death's like."

As Fafhrd and the Mouser, though leagues apart, simultaneously tore like terrified mice from the two black pavilions, they each sighted to the east a steel-blue flame rising like the longest and gleamingest of stilettos, far higher than any other flame they'd seen in the Shadowland, a most narrow, bright-blue flame deeply stabbing the black overcast. The Mouser saw it a bit to the south, Fafhrd a bit to the north. Each frantically dug heels in his horse and galloped on, their paths slowly converging. At that moment, their interviews with their beloveds huge in their memories, to encounter Death seemed the best thing in the world to them, the most to be desired, whether to kill life's most awful creature, or by him be killed.

Yet as they galloped along, Fafhrd couldn't help thinking of how Vlana was ten years older than he and had looked all of that and more in the Shadowland, while the Mouser's mind couldn't avoid touching the topic of Ivrian's basic silliness and snobbery.

Yet they both galloped on willfully, wildly, joyfully, toward the blue flame, which grew ever thicker and brighter, until they saw it came from the huge central chimney of an open-gated, open-doored, low and vast black castle on a long, low hill.

They trotted into the palace side by side, the gate and doorway both being wide and neither man recognizing the presence of each other. The black granite wall before them was indented by a wide fireplace in which blue flame shone almost as blindingly as the naked sun and shot its fiercest flame up the chimney, to make the flame they had noted from afar. Before the fireplace stood an ebony chair, cushioned with black velvet, and on that most grateful of seats rested a shining black mask, full-faced with wide-open eyeholes.

The eight iron-shod hooves of the white horse and the black one sounded a dead clank on the black flagstones.

Fafhrd and the Mouser dismounted and moved, respectively, to the north and south sides of the ebony chair, upholstered with black velvet, on which rested the spangled Mask of Death. Perhaps fortunately, at that time Death himself was away, on business or vacation.

At that moment both Fafhrd and the Mouser realized that he was promise-bound by oath to Ningauble and Sheelba, to slay his comrade. The Mouser whicked out Scalpel. Quite as swiftly Fafhrd whipped out Graywand. They stood face to face, ready to kill each other.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

At that instant a long, glittering scimitar came down between them, swift as light, and the black, glittering Mask of Death was cloven precisely in two, black forehead to black chin.

Then the swift sword of Duke Danius went licking right at Fafhrd. The Northerner barely parried the blow of the mad-eyed aristocrat. The gleaming blade swept back toward the Mouser, who also barely shoved aside the slice.

Both heroes likely would have been slain—for who in the long run has might to master the insane?—except that at that instant Death himself returned to his customary abode in his black castle in the Shadowland and by his black hands seized Duke Danius by the neck and strangled him dead within seventeen of Fafhrd's heartbeats and twenty-one of the Mouser's—and some hundreds of Danius'.

Neither of the two heroes dared look at Death. Before that most remarkable and horrid being was a third finished with Danius, his foolish face, they snatched up a gleaming half of a black mask each, sprang each on his horse, and galloped side by side like twin lunatics of the most frantic sort, ridden even harder than they rode their powerful white and black horses by that cosmically champion jockey Fear, out of the Shadowland southwest by the straightest path possible.

Lankhmar and her environs, to which they swiftly returned, were no great good to them. Ningauble and Sheelba were both most angry at getting only half a mask apiece, even though it was the mask of the most potent being in all universes known and unknown. The two rather self-centered and somewhat irrational archimages, intent on and vastly enamored of their private war—though they were undoubtedly the cunningest and wisest sorcerers ever to exist in the world of Nehwon—were entirely adamant against the very sound four arguments Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser advanced in their self-defense: one, that they had stuck to the magician-set rules by first making certain to get the Mask of Death (or as much as they could of it) out of the Shadowland at whatever personal cost to themselves and diminishment of their self-respect (for if they had fought each other—as rule two required—they would most likely have simultaneously slain each other, and so not even a sliver of a mask would have gotten to Sheel or Ning, while who in his sane senses would take on Death as an opponent?—Danius being a most crushing, present argument here); two, that half a magical mask is better than none; three, that each magician having half the mask, both would be forced to quit their stupid war, co-operate in future, and so double their already considerable powers; and four, that the two sorcerers had neither returned Vlana and Ivrian in their lovely, living flesh to Fafhrd and the Mouser, nor vanished them utterly from time, so

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that there was no memory of them anywhere, as promised, but only tortured the two heroes—and likely the two girls also—by a final horrid encounter. In pets most undignified for great wizards, Ningauble magicked all objects whatsoever out of the home Fafhrd and the Mouser had stolen, while Sheelba burned it to ashes indistinguishable from those of the earlier tenement in which Vlana and Ivrian had perished.

Which was probably all to the good, since the whole idea of the two heroes dwelling in a house behind the Silver Eel—right in the midst of the graveyard of their great beloveds—had undoubtedly been most morbid from the start.

Thereafter Sheelba and Ningauble showing no gratitude whatever, or remorse for their childish revenges, insisted on exacting from the Mouser and Fafhrd the utmost service established by the bargain they had set with the two heroes.

But Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser were never once again haunted by those two admirable and grand girls Ivrian and Vlana, nor even thought of them except with heart-easing and painless gratitude. In fact, within a few days the Mouser began the hottest sort of love affair with a slightly underage and most winsome niece of Karstak Ovartamortes, while Fafhrd took on the identical twin daughters, most beauteous and wealthy and yet on the verge of turning to prostitution for the excitement it promised, of Duke Danius.

What Vlana and Ivrian thought of all this in their eternal dwelling in the Shadowland is entirely their business and that of Death, on whose horrid visage they now could look with no fear whatever.

Have you had trouble finding F&SF on your newsstand?

From time to time, readers report that they have not been able to find F&SF on newsstands in their area. We appreciate this information; we do our best to increase coverage, and we will continue these efforts.

However, we are finding it increasingly difficult to get adequate newsstand distribution. The system is wasteful and inefficient, and it has unfortunately continued to deteriorate in recent years.

If you enjoy F&SF, may we urge you to subscribe. You'll be sure of getting your copy regularly and in advance of newsstand publication. You will also save money. Use the coupon on page 100.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

You should perhaps not read this story if you have a friend or relative in an old age home. The rest of you will surely find something to ponder in Gary Jennings' many-layered piece of grisly humor about: (1) a birthday party at the Golden Sunset Retirement Retreat and (2) . . .

How We Pass the Time in Hell

by GARY JENNINGS

ONCE UPON A TIME I WAS A newspaper reporter in a little town in Virginia. This was a community of stolid tranquillity—some might call it torpor—and frustratingly scant on anything that a big-city reporter would recognize as news. Our paper's front page was perpetually a gray recapping of soporific town council sessions, boiler plate columns of yawn-worthy advice on yam culture from the county agricultural agent, and dismal announcements of the next-arriving revivalist's come-to-Christ camp meeting in Draper's Meadow. We wouldn't have made much stir, though, even if we ever *had* had anything like a spectacular sex-murder for the front page. The newspaper readers in that town invariably turned first to the back page, to the obituaries, to gloat over having stagnated longer in this world than some detested friend or relative.

Nothing that I ever wrote for that backwater *News-Journal* is likely to enshrine my by-line in the annals of journalism. But I do recall one piece I did—partly because it was the very last story I covered for that paper, and partly because of what I left out when I wrote it.

At first it seemed just one more routine assignment, typical of what was regarded thereabouts as hot news. Editor Hatley handed me a grubby slip of paper on which he had scrawled "Golden Sunset, 7:00 p.m." This looked like a weather report, but wasn't. The Golden Sunset Retirement Retreat was the come-on name concocted by greedy Mrs. Mildew Wilkinson for her seedy rest home, just outside town, in which the local families who could afford it stashed their cast-off old folks.

"Miz Wilkinson phoned in," said the editor. "She's throwin' a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

birthday supper tonight for a couple of her guests—cake and candles and all. Two old gents that both turned ninety-seven years old this very day. She thought the quincidence oughta be worth a write-up. I reckon it is."

I groaned, "Oh, damn the old goats." I'd had a date that evening at the local drive-in's triple feature of drag-race movies.

"You don't have to sit through the whole party," Hatley said placatingly. "Just get a picture and a couple of paragraphs. But it's a free meal, if you want to hang around for it."

That it was, and not to be sneezed at by any ill-paid wretch in Hatley's employ. It was even a slightly epochal event, for Mrs. Wilkinson to unclench her flint-skinned fist and offer to feed a nonpaying guest. Of course, she'd be getting a free plug for the Golden Sunset—she never ran a paid ad—and no doubt the meal would consist of no more than the usual Dickens-workhouse gruel she spooned into the old folks on every other day.

Muttering, I drove off in our rattletrap "press car," into the autumn twilight. The Golden Sunset was downhill on Radford Road, and the rickety, rackety old DeSoto made pretty good time downhill. My glum mood lightened a bit. I imagined myself wearing a crash helmet and the car wearing racing stripes. I narrowed my eyes and tightened my gut and hummed "Dragstrip Rock" and pretended I was roaring hellity-split into Suicide Curve. And I damn near was.

The youngest Shiflett kid, on his brand-new birthday bicycle, suddenly swooped out of the dusk, right for my radiator. I swallowed "Dragstrip Rock" and my gizzard together, as I wrenched frantically at the wheel.

Talk about luck. A fraction to the left and I'd have run over the Shiflett brat. A fraction to the right and I'd have creamed head-on into the massive oak tree at the curb of the Pugh property. Somehow I missed them both, and went bucketing down the street shaking my fist at the rear-view mirror. By the time I turned into the graveled driveway of the Golden Sunset, I had forgotten that near-miss encounter. But I remembered it later. I have remembered it often in the years since.

The Golden Sunset Retirement Retreat had formerly been a motel—the Southern Comfort—a hot-pillow joint that had gone bankrupt because the people in that area didn't have gumption enough to philander, or, if they did, were too miserly to pay for doing it in southern comfort. Having been designed for quick turnover rather than for long-term occupancy, the thirteen buildings—one barrack-like edifice, the former owner's quarters-cum-office, surrounded by a dozen doghouse cottages—were jerry-built of plasterboard and corrugated plastic. Beyond renaming the place when she took it over, Mrs. Wilkinson had done nothing to make the quarters more homelike or less likely to peel in a high wind.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I had visited the Golden Sunset on a couple of earlier occasions, when Mrs. Wilkinson had contrived some newsworthy event. Once, for example, some state bureau had threatened to yank the rest home's license unless Mrs. Wilkinson complied with the Commonwealth's repeated demands that she put a fire bucket of sand in each of the old people's shacks. Mrs. Wilkinson had thereupon scurried to some *other* state bureau and wangled a dab of welfare funds which paid for the buckets. This coup I had had to commemorate with a front-page story: "State Honors Local Institution with Grant-in-Aid."

I got out of the press car in front of the larger building, which was nowadays the communal dining hall. I knew this from experience, but anyone else might have known it from the smell. All of the Golden Sunset's buildings smelled indistinguishably of stale urine, except this one, which smelled of boiling turnips, frying grease, boiling pinto beans, and stale urine.

I was hauling the paper's old press camera—an obsolete and unwieldy Speed Graphic—out of the DeSoto's back seat when Mrs. Wilkinson hailed me from the dining hall doorway. "Come right on in, Mr. Newspaper Man, and *welcome*. We all waitin' on you." She was a small cold crag of a woman, with a nimbus of hair that had been bleached and frizzed to ectoplasm. She looked like a little piece of dry ice, fuming.

Inside the hall, Mrs. Wilkinson's three muscular attendants were ranged along the far side of the long trestle table, setting it with unbreakable paper dishes and blunt plastic "silverware." These three thugs were described in the Golden Sunset's brochure (and perforce in every *News-Journal* story) as "trained, experienced, gentle and understanding Practical Nurses." I knew that two were men and one was a woman, but from where I stood they all looked so uniformly like chain-gang guards that I'd have had to bend down and peer under the table to determine which was the one wearing a skirt. As the attendants laid the places, they had to keep elbowing away the score or so of inmates, the old folks, who were pressing and shuffling impatiently to get to the table.

Mrs. Wilkinson introduced me to the "guests" merely by pointing and pronouncing names—"And over yonder, scratchin' himself, *that's* our dear, sweet Mr. Walsh"—but of course I already recognized most of them from previous visits. There was some variety of ages among them but, men and women, they all looked nearly as much alike as did the attendants. The men's faces were sagged, softened and aged into near-femininity; the women's faces were weathered, coarsened and aged into near-masculinity; they had all achieved a sort of neuterdom. The men wore droopy, mismatched coats and trousers; the women wore shapeless, draggy-hemmed dresses; but suits and dresses were all

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

identically patterned with rocking-chair wrinkles, dandruff sprinkles, and crusted-on food droppings.

There was fat old Baldy Walsh, who drooled—literally and endlessly—over some dingy, tattered cheesecake pictures of Lillian Russell, which he forever carried clutched in one hand. With the other hand he was forever picking forlornly at the crotch of his baggy trousers. His only other talent was petty theft. I knew that by the close of tonight's party old Walsh would slyly have pilfered every piece of dime-store plasticware on the table. And, as always, before the table could be set for the next morning's meal, the attendants would have to hold the old man down and ransack his nasty crevices and apertures for the loot.

There was hippo-hipped old Mrs. French, who had evidently dedicated the rest of her life to trying to replace Lillian Russell in old Baldy Walsh's affections. She trailed him everywhere, fluttering her beady eyes and simpering and surreptitiously trying to redirect Baldy's plucking hand from his crotch to her own. The attendants never tried to break Mrs. French of her nauseating flirtation, and I knew why. They preferred her to keep occupied because, whenever she stopped carrying on and behaved like a lady for a minute, it meant she was wetting herself.

There was chinless old "Jesus" Barron, nicknamed Jesus because, most of the time, he thought he was. This was another delusion which the attendants indulged; when old Jesus was scuttling around maundering pieties and dispensing phony benedictions, at least he wasn't having what Mrs. Wilkinson called "one of his spells"—in which, I take it, he thought he was the God Siva the Destroyer.

There was toothless old Del Snively, whom I knew to be one of the birthday celebrants—old, *old* Del Snively, ninety-seven today—though, in truth, he looked no more decayed or senile than Mr. Walsh or Mrs. French.

There were the sister hysterics, Erika and Lisa Gordon—fondly called, by me anyway, the Gorgon Girls—incarcerated here more or less at the request of the authorities. One of the Gorgons had a tendency to take off all her clothes in public places, and the harassed police department had persuaded the family to put her away. The other Gorgon's tendency was never to take off any of her clothes at all, and I think it was the sanitation department that had engineered the commitment of that one.

It was a jolly collection of jetsam that inhabited the Golden Sunset—the useless, the helpless, the lunatic, the mere mess. It occurred to me that I and all the rest of us outsiders ought to be grateful to the despicable Mrs. Wilkinson. She was our mortician of the less-than-living, and she kept their pitiful repulsiveness sequestered in this scruffy anteroom of the hereafter, out of our sight and out of mind.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

" 'The bones feel cold,' " croaked a hoarse voice behind me. The remark so nearly paralleled my thoughts that I turned quickly, and my sudden move seemed to startle the shriveled, bearded little man standing there. He took a hasty step backward.

"It's a quotation," he growled, almost defensively. "Stephen Vincent Benet. 'Tragedy may occur in a bandbox. Horror needs no set apparatus of skeletons to make the bones feel cold.' " He repeated, as if he relished the line, " 'To make the bones feel cold.' "

I stared at the little old fellow in the bristly whiskers. He was obviously one of the inmates, a new one to me, but he was equally obviously not of their common Virginia clay. For one thing, he was the only old man there wearing a coat and trousers that matched and were clean; for another, his mind seemed still to be functioning.

"And this is our *other* birthday boy," chirruped Mrs. Wilkinson. "Mr. Newman is our sweet li'l ole *Yankee,* come all the way down from New York City to stay with us a while. A real far-travelin' gentleman."

"The Wandering Jew, is what she means," rasped the wee old codger with a mischievous smirk. "Nineteen hundred and seventy years old today."

"Ninety-seven, you naughty man. Ninety-seven years *young.* Mr. Newman *will* have his li'l joke. Now, Mr. Newspaper Man—"

"Jennings," I said, intending it for an introduction to the newcomer.

"Mr. *Jinnin's,* I meant," said Mrs. Wilkinson. "How 'bout we take the picture with the cake now, Mr. Jinnin's, *befo'* supper, so the guests won't be all—so they'll still be all spruce and tidy?"

"Before we slobber all down our whiskers, she means," said old man Newman's froggy voice.

I hefted the mossy old Speed Graphic, plugged a bulb into the flash gun, slapped a plateholder into the back flap, and pulled the slide. Aunt Sophronia, the cook, came from the kitchen bearing a lopsided, gray-frosted cake studded with little white candles, all askew, like tombstones in an untended cemetery. As the inmates mooed and bleated peevishly, the attendants shepherded them into a straggly but compact bunch behind the long table. Mrs. Wilkinson directed.

"Somebody please wipe Mr. Walsh's chin. Miz French, *do* fold your hands in your lap. In your *own* lap, there's a good girl. Nurse Mace, hand Mr. Snively the bread knife. It's all right, he can't cut himself if we watch real close. Miss Erika—or is that Miss Lisa?—*do* please zip yourself up again. Mr. Snively, you poise the knife over the cake. Mr. Newman, you go stand right beside Mr. Snively. Mr. Barron, *do* take off that silly hat; you *know* Jesus never wore no hat like that. Somebody please wipe Mr. Walsh's chin again. Mr. Snively and Mr. Newman, smile and look *proud* now. It's y'all's happy *birthday.*"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

As if on cue, somebody in the rear rank began to sing in a high, cracked voice, "Happy Birthday to-oo You..." I raised the camera and he shut up. There was a brief silence, during which everybody strained to appear handsome and irresistible. Old Snively, his bread knife trembling over the unlit candles, looked like the Grim Reaper standing in a boneyard. Mr. Newman croaked into the silence, "'And the wood-worm picks...and the death-watch ticks...'" I fired the bulb just as he winked at me and said confidingly, "Browning."

"That was splendid," caroled Mrs. Wilkinson. "Now let's all eat." As Sophronia whisked the uncut cake off the table, there was a general cawing and cackling of outrage, and many anxiously grasping claws. "We'll have the cake *after,*" scolded Mrs. Wilkinson. "Supper first. Y'all take your places now. Mr. Jinnin's, come sit between me and the guests of *honor.*"

I don't really know what made me stay; some horrible fascination, I guess. But I sat down, Mrs. Wilkinson on my left, old Newman on my right and Del Snively beyond him.

Mr. Newman was saying to Snively, "...One hundred? Why, of course you'll make one hundred. And top it, too. Like everybody—even young Mr. Newspaper Jennings here. A hundred is nothing, man."

Sophronia slid by behind us, ladling food onto our paper plates. It was one of the house specialties for the toothless: some kind of slimy hash that looked as if it had already been eaten.

"Think of life as an onion, all layers within layers," Mr. Newman rasped at Snively, who was trying to look intelligent. "And think of yourself as inhabiting every layer of the onion simultaneously, with the same soul and body, the same friends and surroundings, the same past, the same mind and memories. On every layer, do you follow me?"

Everybody at the table had fallen to, forking and gobbling as if the mess on their plates was edible. I gazed down the length of the board and watched them eating. Those with false teeth made clicking, chittering noises as they chewed. Those without seemed to swallow their lower jaw at every munch.

Just to be sociable, I spoke to Mr. Newman. "How did you happen to come all the way down here from New York?"

"I go hither and yon in the world," he said in his frog voice. "You know. 'The very fiends weave ropes of sand...Rather than taste pure hell in idleness.' Browning."

I couldn't think of any immediate rejoinder to that; so he turned back to old Snively. "We're all here at this moment, on this layer of the existential onion, right?" He snapped his brittle little fingers. "A heart attack hits you here at the table. You fall down dead. We bury you. We miss you and mourn you."

His birthday buddy went on eating, unperturbed, repeatedly swallowing his lower jaw.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"But your consciousness, the essential Mr. Snively, has shifted in that instant to another layer of the onion—do you follow me?—where you never died at all. Everything else is the same. The table, the company, the party, this godawful smegma they call food."

Mrs. Wilkinson glared at him and said loudly to me, "Dear Mr. Newman hasn't had *time* yet to learn to appreciate good southern cookin'."

"On this new layer of existence," Mr. Newman went on to Snively, "where the heart attack never happened, you go on placidly slurping this birthday swill. And you go on having happy birthdays ever after. Back on the previous layer, Mrs. Wilkinson is gnashing her teeth because she's lost a paying boarder. But on this new layer, she's saying—"

"*Mister* Newman!"

"Maybe somebody else on this layer drops dead at the table, but you don't. You never do and never will, is what it amounts to."

There was a small commotion down toward the end of the table. Old Jesus Barron's silly hat had fallen off his head into his hash, and one of the attendants was trying to retrieve it before Jesus ate it.

"Every time you die, you simply don't know it. You just slip away to the next layer and go right on doing what you were doing. You've probably died in your sleep half a dozen times in the last half-dozen years. Each time, you left behind a bereaved Mrs. Wilkinson and a gaggle of squabbling heirs, all weeping crocodile tears. . ."

"Mister *Newman!*"

". . .But you merely got up the next morning and carried on, unaware."

"I nearly did die oncet," old Snively spoke for the first time. "In Cuba. In the waw."

"In the war, eh?" said Mr. Newman. "Bit of action?"

"Covered the medics whilst they 'vacuated some wounded. Me, single-handed, holdin' off a whole enemy patrol. Christly close shave."

"Good man. Silver Star?"

"Bronze Star. Got it in m' trunk."

"If you had been killed, you'd certainly have got the Medal of Honor. But you *were* killed, of course, in one layer of the existential onion, and you no doubt were awarded the medal posthumously. It must have been a comfort and a consolation to your next of kin."

"Yep, must've," said Snively, in some bewilderment.

There was a sudden screech from Mrs. French. It seemed she had been trying to get old Baldy Walsh's hand into her lap, at a moment when he was employing that hand to steal a plastic fork, and Mrs. French had suffered a superficial stab wound in the groin.

"You, young Jennings," came that gruff voice again, as Mr. Newman swiveled his beard at me. "Probably you died once at birth, and died again of scarlet fever or something as a child. You'd never have known of those instances. But

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

have *you* ever had a close shave? A bad fall? A narrow squeak on the highway?"

I was momentarily caught tongue-tied, but then I described the near-miss with the Shiflett boy on the bike, just an hour before.

"Talk about luck, you say? No such luck, my lad. In another world just like this one, in an identical dreary town of the same name, the cops are right now scraping you off that tree trunk, and tomorrow your editor will be advertising for a new reporter. But in the flicker of an instant, you switched to this layer of existence, twitched your car past that tree, and here you are, still alive to enjoy this pretty party. . . .My God, what's that appalling stench?"

Mr. Newman was the only one taken by surprise. The rest of us had seen Mrs. French leave off pestering Baldy Walsh to sit up straight in her chair and start eating as daintily as a duchess, and we all knew what she was doing.

"So I'm still alive to enjoy this pretty party," I said, trying not to breathe too deeply of Mrs. French's vile effluvium. "What you're saying is that nobody ever really dies. Not ever."

"We keep diminishing, you might say, as we withdraw from one layer after another. But it doesn't matter. The number of layers is infinite." He fanned a hand in front of his face.

"Sophronia, bring some rags," called Mrs. Wilkinson; then she changed her mind. "No, forget it, don't you do it. Miz French, just for bein' a bad girl, you're goin' to *sit* there in your wee-wee until we all retire from table. We're all goin' to pretend nothin' happened, and *you're* goin' to be the one to suffer for it."

That was a lie; we all suffered, as the miasma filled the room almost palpably and visibly. Mr. Newman made some strangled noises and pushed his plate away, still full.

"If your theory is right," I said, breathing shallowly, "the world ought to be pretty damn crowded—full of all the people that ever lived. There ought to be cavemen still walking around. And Pharaohs and Caesars and George Washington and. . ."

"And almost certainly they are, in some further layer of the onion that you and I haven't reached yet. But we're getting there." With one hand he pushed his bristly beard up over his nose and mouth, and held it there, and spoke through it from then on, an oracle croaking from within a thicket.

"Then each layer," I persisted, "must be more and more crowded as we move along. How do the people in the further layers account for that?"

"You've heard them," he said, his voice muffled by the beard. "They grumble about a population explosion."

"Oh, come on now!" I laughed at him. "That's because of too many people having too many babies."

"And why are there so many people to have all those babies?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Well, nowadays fewer people die young. The life expectancy has gone up to—" I stopped, confounded.

"There, you said it yourself. This crowded world talks wistfully of a time—read your history books—when the average life expectancy was only thirty-five or forty years. The life expectancy today—read your own newspaper—is upwards of seventy. In this layer of existence that you and I inhabit right now—He tapped a twiggy forefinger on my arm "—more than *one in ten* of the people in the United States are more than sixty-five years old!"

"There are reasons," I said. "Better diet. Medical advances."

"Of course there are reasons! There can't be anything supernatural about it. You won't find any layer of existence that takes us to be spooky leftovers from some other layer. But whether we old poops are still around because of nutrition or medicine or pure blamed cussedness, it doesn't affect my theory." He tucked his beard closer around his nose. "The theory is not a new one, by the way, nor original with me. But it's only recently that the proofs of it have begun to be evident."

"I—you—dammit, you make it all sound so logical. But why should I argue? Screwy or not, it's no bad idea. To think of living forever. . ."

"Feller in my platoon," old Snively interrupted abruptly, "threw himself on top of a grenade to keep it from killin' us all. Killed *him* though. Or would you say it didn't, perfessor?" He grinned mockingly.

"Sure it did, in this layer of the onion, the one you're still alive in. But in another layer, maybe the one where you died and got the Medal of Honor, *he* survived."

"What?!" exclaimed Snively. "With his whole face gone, and most of his front, and both his arms? That'd be one helluva way to live!"

"A hell of a way," Mr. Newman agreed, with a grimace. "But you'll see some just like him in the VA hospitals."

"Gawd."

"All of a sudden," I said, "your theory of eternal life doesn't seem so attractive."

"Yes, that's the drawback. We survive the mortal diseases and the killing wounds, but we take them all with us from layer to layer. Along the way we hurt more and more, we tatter and fray and unravel. Hair and teeth stop growing, but the ulcers and the cancers don't. The brain gets mushy, the pecker gets limp, and the limbs get stiff." He paused and coughed hackingly. "Me, I'm fairly hale for my age. Be losing this bum larynx in a little while, but nobody'll mind my shutting up. Hairless old Walsh over there, though—" The three of us looked at Baldy, dribbling drool into his plate but still eating voraciously. "The only thing *not* wrong with Baldy is dandruff. And he'll go on getting less nice to be next to, through all the layers and ages of eternity."

Old Snively looked thoughtful. I probably looked a little green by now. I swallowed heavily and asked,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Just how did you come by this theory anyway, Mr. Newman?"

"In my youth I dabbled in diabolism."

"Diabolism? I don't see the connection."

Old Newman shrugged. "Saint Anthony of Padua once asked the Devil himself, 'How do you people pass the time in Hell?' I've always admired the old bugger's reply. The Devil said, *'In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni.'* "

"Latin, eh?" I murmured, to show that I recognized the language at least and was not myself of the common Virginia clay.

"Well, not the *best* Latin," rumbled Mr. Newman, "and not at all the truth. But, as you might expect from the Devil, it *is* devilishly clever. It's a palindrome, you see. Here, let me show you."

He took my pencil and notebook and wrote in a single line across one of the blank pages:

IN GIRUM IMUS NOCTE ET CONSUMIMUR IGNI

"See? It reads the same either-forward or backward. And either way it translates—um, roughly—'Each night, we come together and are consumed by fire.' "

"Devilishly clever, yes," I nodded. "But you say that's not the truth."

"No."

"How would you suppose one *does* pass the time in Hell?"

"Like this." Mr. Newman waved a hand to take in the whole of the Golden Sunset Retirement Retreat.

The party was at its peak of gaiety. Old Baldy Walsh's clothes were spiky with concealed utensils, and he was now trying to force a saltcellar inside his pouchy cheeks. Mrs. French sat and dripped and tried to look queenly about it. Erika or Lisa, whichever was the stripping Gorgon, was doing just that. The female attendant was at her chair, roughly shoving the garments back on, but the Gorgon was taking them off faster than they could be replaced. One of her limp, flat dugs flopped in the remnants of her hash.

Mr. Newman, his eyebrows raised, looked into my face. I tried to put on a smile of tolerant amusement.

" 'And the fair garden's rose-encircled child,' " he grated, " 'Smiled unbelief, and shuddered as he smiled.' " With a professorial air, he added, "Winthrop Mackworth Praed."

The party excitement suddenly got the better of old Jesus Barron. He went into one of his spells and began to tear his silly hat to shreds. The two male attendants carried him bodily away, frothing and gibbering. Old Walsh, failing to get the saltcellar into his mouth, now glanced stealthily about, removed Mrs. French's paw from inside his trousers and dropped the saltcellar in. Sitting on it, he began to scroonch around.

"It's hellish, all right," I muttered. "But—Hell?"

" 'All the horror is in just this; that there is no horror.' " Mr. Newman cleared his throat and, as usual, added the attribution, "Cleckley."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mrs. Wilkinson was snapping out whiplash commands and prohibitions, but not accomplishing much beyond adding to the pandemonium. The rest of the old folks at the table were sunk in a vegetable catatonia, sitting as lumpish and ugly as the turnips they'd just eaten.

"To live forever," Mr. Newman's hoarse voice went on implacably. "It's something to look forward to, isn't it?"

"I've got a while yet," I said weakly.

"Then what are you doing here now?" he rasped almost sternly. "You'll be here soon enough. And long enough."

I lurched up from my chair and away from the table, hearing old Snively behind me cackle and confide something to Mr. Newman. In the general bedlam, all I could hear was "...be some party, eh, when we've all begun to rot..."

"It's time!" Mrs. Wilkinson screamed, to make herself heard. "Time to light all the birthday candles and SING!"

I fled.

The car sprayed gravel as it careened out of the driveway, narrowly missing a telephone pole at the curb—probably *not* missing it, I thought confusedly. I needed a drink, and in this town there was only one place to get it.

I headed for my key club, a kind of institution peculiar to the Bible Belt dry states. A key club may sound like a real swinging establishment, but this one was only a furtive backroom hideaway, as squalid and woebegone as any skid row dive, where distinguished members like me—anybody who would pay three dollars a month—could legally keep a store-bought bottle on the premises and buy setups of chaser. In this community, true, that *was* considered "swinging" and sophisticated-sinful and ever so elegant.

I bellied up to the bar; and Smoky the bartender reached behind him, almost without looking, got hold of the fifth of Green River with my name on it, and poured a shot glass full. I said, "Gimme a dope," and he added a class of Coca Cola with some shards of ice in it. I knocked back

FREE: 20th ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

The subscription coupon on the next page will bring you a free copy of our October 1969 20th anniversary issue, which is fast becoming a collector's item. It includes stories by Isaac Asimov, Brian W. Aldiss, Philip K. Dick, Robert Bloch, Ray Bradbury, Theodore Sturgeon, Larry Niven, Harlan Ellison and Roger Zelazny. You may use the coupon to enter a new subscription or to renew or extend your current one. The coupon is backed by this copy, and removal does not affect the text of the surrounding story.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the raw green whiskey and, before gagging, followed it with a gulp of Coke. Smoky refilled the shot glass while I looked around the melancholy clubroom. The tin tables lithographed with beer ads, the mortuary folding chairs. The floor unswept, foul with butts and spit. The pretentious back bar scantily stocked with our hoarded few bottles and one cash register.

There were three other distinguished members strung along the bar, as flaccid and sodden as scarecrows after a rain. They paid not the slightest attention to me or to one another. Each of them huddled close around his drink, clinging joyously to that glass buoy. The room reeked of defeat and disillusion. I raised my eyes and saw the pathetically, ludicrously ironic sign taped to the bar mirror: NO DANCING.

"What are you doing here?" Mr. Newman's remembered voice rasped at me. I fled again.

The *News-Journal* office was locked and dark. I let myself in, pulled the string of the bulb hanging over my desk, sat down and wrote my last story for the paper. I did it in the two paragraphs the editor had asked for, and in the simple-minded style and words of few syllables which our readers required. "The Golden Sunset Retirement Retreat last night was the scene of a double birthday party for two guests who both turned 97 yesterday. . ." and so forth.

I dropped the sheet of copy paper on Hatley's desk and another, even briefer text on top of it—my resignation. I weighted these down with the plateholder bearing the party picture. Leaving the DeSoto outside the office, I walked to my furnished room and from there to the Greyhound bus stop.

There was a long, long time ahead, and I figured I'd look for a better Hell to spend forever in. Now I go hither and yon in the world, and I consort only with the loveliest damned ladies, and laughing and joyful—*in girum imus nocte et consumimur igni.*

Mercury Press, Inc., Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753

Enter my subscription to F&SF, and rush me a free copy of the 20th anniversary issue. I enclose ☐ $8.50 for one year; ☐ $15.00 for two years; ☐ $21.00 for three years.

11-1

Please print

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... State ..... Zip # .....

Add 50¢ per year for Canada and Mexico; $1.00 for other foreign countries

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Left Hand of the Electron

ISAAC ASIMOV

SCIENCE

I RECEIVED A LETTER YESTERday which criticized my writing style. It complained, "you avoid the poetic to the extent that when a cryptic, glowing, 'charged' phrase occurs to you, I'd be willing to bet that you deliberately put it aside and opt for a clearer but more pedestrian one."

All I can say to that is that you bet your sweet life I do.

As all who read these monthly essays must surely be aware, I have a dislike for the mystical approach to the Universe, whether in the name of science, philosophy, or religion. I also have a dislike for the mystical approach to literature.

I dare say it is possible to evoke an emotional reaction through a "cryptic, glowing, 'charged' phrase," but you show me a cryptic phrase and I'll show you any number of readers who, not knowing what it means but afraid to admit their ignorance, will say, "My, isn't that poetic and emotionally effective."

Maybe it is, and maybe it isn't; but a vast number of literary incompetents get by on the intellectual insecurity of their readers, and a vast number of hacks write a vast quantity of bad "poetry" and make a living at it.

For myself, I manage to retain a certain amount of intellectual secur-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ity. When I read a book that is intended (presumably) for the general public and find that I can make neither head nor tail of it, it never occurs to me that this is because I am lacking in intelligence. Rather, I reach the calmly assured opinion that the author is either a poor writer, a confused thinker, or, most likely, both.

Holding these views, it is not surprising that I "opt for a clearer but more pedestrian" style in my own writing.

For one thing my business and my *passion* (even in my fiction writing) is to explain. Partly it is the missionary instinct that makes me yearn to make my readers see and understand the Universe as I see and understand it, so that they may enjoy it as I do. Partly, also, I do it because the effort to put things on paper clearly enough to make the reader understand, makes it possible for *me* to understand, too.

I try to teach because whether or not I succeed in teaching others, I invariably succeed in teaching myself.

Yet I must admit that sometimes this self-imposed task of mine is harder than other times. Continuing last month's exposition on parity and related topics is one of the harder times, but then no one ever promised me a rose garden, so let's continue—

The conservation laws are the basic generalizations of physics and of the physics-aspects of all other sciences. In general, a conservation law says that some particular overall measured-property of a closed system (one that is not interacting with any other part of the Universe) remains constant regardless of any changes taking place within the system. For instance, the total quantity of energy within a closed system is always the same regardless of changes within the system, and this is called "the law of conservation of energy."

The law of conservation of energy is a great convenience to physicists and is probably the most important single conservation law, and therefore the most important single law of any kind in all of science. Yet it does not seem to carry a note of overwhelming necessity about it.

Why should energy be conserved? What shouldn't the energy of a closed system increase now and then, or decrease?

Actually, we can't think of a reason, if we think of energy only. We simply have to accept the law as fitting observation.

The conservation laws, however, seem to be connected with symmetries in the Universe. It can be shown, for instance, that if one assumes time to be symmetrical, one must expect energy to be conserved. That time is symmetrical means that any portion of it is like any other and that the laws of nature therefore display "invariance with time" and are the same at any time.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In a rough and ready way, this has always been assumed by mankind–for closed systems. If a certain procedure lights a fire or smelts copper ore or raises bread-dough on one day, the same procedure should also work the next day or the next year under similar conditions. If it doesn't, the assumption is that you no longer have a closed system. There may be interference from the outside in the form (mystics would say) of a malicious witch or an evil spirit, or in the form (rationalists would say) of unexpected moisture in the wood, impurities in the ore, or coolness in the oven.

If we avoid complications by considering the simplest possible forms of matter–subatomic particles moving in response to the various fields produced by themselves and their neighbors–we readily assume that they will obey the same laws at any moment in time. If a system of subatomic particles were to be transferred by some time-machine to a point in time a century ago or a million years ago, or a million years in the future, the change in time could not be detected by studying the behavior of the subatomic particles *only*. And if that is true, the law of conservation of energy is true.

Of course, invariance with time is just as much an assumption as the conservation of energy is, and assumptions may not square with observation. Thus, some theoretical physicists have speculated that the gravitational interaction may be weakening in intensity very slowly with time. In that case, you could tell an abrupt change in time by noting (in theory) an abrupt change in the strength of the gravitational field produced by the particles being studied. Such a change in gravitational intensity with time has not yet been actually demonstrated, but if it existed, the law of conservation of energy would be not quite true.

Putting that possibility to one side, we end with two equivalent assumptions: 1) energy is conserved in a closed system, and 2) the laws of nature are invariant with time.

Either both statements are correct or both are incorrect, but it is the second, it seems to me, that seems more intuitively necessary to us. We might not be bothered by having a little energy created or destroyed now and then, but we would somehow feel very uncomfortable with a Universe in which the laws of nature changed from day to day.

Consider, next, the law of conservation of momentum. The total momentum (mass times velocity) of a closed system does not vary with changes within the system. It is the conservation of momentum that allows billiard sharps to work with mathematical precision. (There is also an independent law of conservation of angular momentum, where circular movement about some point or line is considered.)

Both conservation laws, that of momentum and that of angular momentum, depend on the fact that the laws of nature are invariant with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

position in space. In other words, if a group of subatomic particles are instantaneously shifted from here to the neighborhood of Mars, or of a distant galaxy, you could not tell by observing the subatomic particles *alone* that such a shift had taken place. (Actually, the gravitational intensity due to neighboring masses of matter would very likely be different, but we are dealing with the ideal situation of fields originating only with the particles within the closed system, so we ignore outside gravitation.)

Again, the necessity of invariance with space is more easily accepted than the necessity of the conservation of momentum or of angular momentum.

Most other conservation laws also involve invariances of this sort, but not of anything that can be reduced to such easily intuitive concepts as the symmetry of space and time. Parity is an exception.

In 1927, the Hungarian physicist Eugene P. Wigner showed that conservation of parity is equivalent to right-left symmetry.

This means that for parity to be conserved there must be no reason to prefer the right direction to the left or vice versa in considering the laws of nature. If one billiard ball hits another to the right of center and bounces off to the right, it will bounce off to the left in just the same way if it had hit the other ball to the left of center.

If a ball bouncing off to the right is reflected in a mirror that is held parallel to the original line of travel, the moving ball in the mirror seems to bounce off to the left. If you were shown diagrams of the movement of the real ball and of the movement of the mirror-image ball, you could not tell from the diagrams alone, which was real and which the image. Both would be following the laws of nature perfectly well.

If a billiard ball is itself perfectly spherical and unmarked, it would show left-right symmetry. That is, its image would also be perfectly spherical and unmarked, and if you were shown a photograph of both the ball itself and the image, you couldn't tell which was which from the appearance alone. Of course, if the billiard ball had some asymmetric marking on it, like the number "7", you could tell which was real and which was the image, because the number "7" would be "backward" on the image.

The trickiness of the mirror-image business is confused because we ourselves are asymmetric. Not only are certain inner organs (the liver, stomach, spleen and pancreas) to one side or the other of the central plane, but some perfectly visible parts (the part in the hair, as an example, or certain skin markings) are also. This means we can easily tell whether a picture of ourselves (or some other familiar individual) is of us as we are or of a mirror image by noting that the part in the hair is on the "wrong side" for instance.

This gives us the illusion that telling left from right is an easy thing, when actually it isn't. Suppose you had to identify left and right to some stranger

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

where the human body could not be used as reference; to a Martian who couldn't see you, for instance. You might do it by reference to the Earth itself, if the Martian could make out its surface, for the continental configurations are asymmetric, but what if you were talking with someone far our near Alpha Centauri?

The situation is more straightforward if we consider subatomic particles and assume them (barring information to the contrary) to be left-right symmetric, like perfectly spherical unmarked billiard balls. In that case if you took a photograph of the particle and of its mirror-image, you could not tell from the appearance alone, which was particle and which mirror-image.

If the particle were doing something toward our left, then the mirror-image would be doing the equivalent toward our right. If, however, both the leftward act and the rightward act were equally possible by the laws of nature, you still couldn't tell which was particle and which was mirror-image. And that is precisely the situation that prevails when the law of conservation of parity holds true.

But what if the law of conservation of parity is not true under certain conditions. Under those conditions, then, the particle is asymmetric or is working asymmetrically; that is, doing something leftward which can't be done rightward, or vice versa. In that case, you can say, "This is the particle and this is the image. I can tell because the image is backward (or because the image is doing something which is impossible)."

This is equivalent to recognizing that a representation of a friend of ours is actually a mirror image because his hair-part is on the wrong side or because he seems to be writing fluently with his left hand when you know he is actually right-handed.

When Lee and Yang (see last month's column) suggested that the law of conservation of parity didn't hold in weak nuclear interactions, that meant one ought to be able to differentiate between a weak nuclear event and its mirror image. And one common weak nuclear event is the emission of an electron by an atomic nucleus.

The atomic nucleus can be considered as a spinning particle, which is symmetrical east and west and also north and south (just as the Earth is). If we take the mirror image of the particle (the "image-particle") it seems to be spinning in the "wrong direction," but are you sure? If you turn the image-particle upside down it is then spinning in the right direction and it still looks just like the particle. You can't differentiate between the particle and the image-particle by the direction of its spin because you can't tell whether the image-particle is right-side-up or upside-down. As far as spin is concerned an upside-down image-particle looks just like a right-side-up particle.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Of course, a spinning particle has two magnetic poles, a north pole and a south pole, and to all appearances we can tell which is which. By lining the particle up with a strong magnetic field we can compare the direction of the particle's axis of rotation with that of the Earth and identify the north and south pole. In that way we could tell whether the particle was right-side-up or upside-down.

Ah, but we are using the Earth as a reference here and the Earth is asymmetric thanks to the position and shape of the continents. If we didn't use the Earth as reference (and we shouldn't because we ought to be able to work out the behavior of subatomic particles in deep space far from the Earth) there would be no way of telling north pole from south pole. Whether we considered spin or poles, we couldn't tell a symmetrical particle from its mirror-image.

But suppose the particle gives off an electron. Such an electron tends to fly off from one of the poles, but from which? Suppose it could fly off from either pole with equal ease. In that case, if we were dealing with a trillion nuclei giving off a trillion electrons, half would fly off one pole and half off the other. We could not distinguish one pole from the other and we still couldn't distinguish the particle from the image-particle.

On the other hand, if the electrons tended to come off from one pole more often than from the other, we would have a marker for one of the poles. We could say, "Viewing the particle from a point above the pole that gives off the electrons, it rotates counterclockwise. That means that this other particle is actually an image-particle because viewed in that manner it rotates clockwise."

This is exactly what should be true if the law of conservation of parity does not hold in the case of electron-emission by nuclei.

But is it true? When atomic nuclei (trillions of them) are shooting off electrons, the electrons come off in every direction equally—but that is only because the nuclear poles are facing in every direction, in which case electrons would shoot off in all ways alike whether they were coming from one pole only or from both poles equally.

In order to check whether the electrons are coming from both poles or from one pole only, the nuclei must be lined up so that all the north poles are pointing in the same direction. To do this, the nuclei must be lined up by a powerful magnetic field and must be cooled to nearly absolute zero so that they have no energy that will vibrate them out of line.

After Lee and Yang made their suggestion, Madame Chien-Shiung Wu, a fellow physics professor at Columbia University, performed exactly this experiment. Cobalt-60 nuclei, lined up appropriately, shot electrons off the south pole, not the north pole.

In this way, it was proven that the law of conservation of parity did not

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

hold for weak nuclear interactions. This meant one could distinguish between left and right in such cases and the electron, when involved in weak nuclear interactions, tended to act leftward rather than rightward so that it can be said to be "left-handed."

The electron, which carries a unit negative electric charge, has another kind of "image." There is a particle exactly like the electron, but with a unit positive electric charge. It is the "positron."

Indeed every charged particle has a twin with an opposite charge, an "antiparticle." There is a mathematical operation which converts the expression that describes a particle into one that describes the equivalent antiparticle (or vice versa). This operation is called "charge conjugation."

As it happens, if a particle is left-handed, its antiparticle is right-handed, and vice-versa.

Observe then, that if an electron is doing something left-handedly, its mirror-image would seem to be an electron doing it right-handedly, which is impossible—and the impossibility would serve to distinguish the image from the particle.

On the other hand if you employed the charge conjugation operation, you would change a left-handed electron into a left-handed positron. The latter is also impossible and this impossibility would serve to distinguish the image from the particle.

In weak nuclear interactions, then, not only does the law of conservation of parity break down, but also the law of conservation of charge conjugation.*

However, suppose you not only alter the right-left of the electron by imagining its mirror image, but also imagine that at the same time you have altered the charge from negative to positive. You have effected both a parity change and a charge conjugation change. The result of this double-shift would be the conversion of a left-handed electron into a right-handed positron. Since left-handed electrons and right-handed positron are both possible, you cannot tell by simply looking at a diagram of each, which is the original particle and which the image.

In other words, although neither parity nor charge conjugation are conserved in weak nuclear interactions, the combination of the two *is* conserved. Using abbreviations we say that there is neither P conservation nor C conservation in weak nuclear interactions, but there is, however, CP conservation.

It may not be clear to you how it is possible for two items to be

** Both conservation laws are true in strong nuclear interactions, however. In strong nuclear interactions, not only are leftward and rightward equally natural at all times, but anything a charged particle can do, the charged antiparticle can also do.*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

individually not conserved, yet to be conserved together. Or (to put it in equivalent fashion) you may not see how two objects, each easily distinguishable from its mirror image, are no longer so distinguishable if taken together.

Well, then, consider—

The letter "b", reflected in the mirror is "d". The letter "d", reflected in the mirror is "b". Thus, both "b" and "d" are easily distinguished from their mirror images.

On the other hand, if the combination "bd" is reflected in a mirror, the image is also "bd". Both "b" and "d" are individually inverted and the order in which they occur is inverted, too. All the inversions cancel and the net result is that although "b" and "d" are altered by reflection, the combination "bd" is not. (Try it yourself with printed lower case letters and a mirror.)

Let's point out one more thing about left-right reflection. Suppose the Solar system were reflected in a mirror. If we observed the image, we would see that all the planets were circling the Sun the "wrong way" and that the Moon was circling the Earth the "wrong way," and that the Sun and all the planets were rotating on their axes the "wrong way."

If you ignored the asymmetry of the surface structure of the planets, and just considered each world in the Solar system to be a featureless sphere, then you could not tell the image from the real thing from their motions alone. The fact that everything was turning the "wrong way" means nothing, for if you observe the image while standing on your head, then everything is turning the "right way" again, and in outer space, there is no way of distinguishing between standing "upright" and standing "on your head."

And certainly the gravitational interaction, which is the predominant factor in the Solar system's working is unaffected by the reversal of right and left. If all the revolutions and rotations in the Solar system were suddenly reversed, gravitational interactions would account for the reversed motions as adequately and as neatly as for the originals.

But consider this—

Suppose that we didn't use a mirror at all. Imagine, instead, that the direction of time reversed itself. The result would be like that of running a film backward. With time reversed, the Earth would seem to be going "backward" about the Sun. All the planets would seem to be going "backward" about the Sun, and the Moon to be going "backward" about the Earth. All the bodies of the Solar system would be spinning "backward" about their axis.

But notice that the "backward" that takes place on reversing time is just the same as the "wrong way" that takes place in the mirror image. Reversing the direction of time-flow and mirror-imaging space produce the same effect.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And there is no way of telling from observing the motions of the Solar system alone whether time is flowing forward or backward. This inability to tell the direction of time-flow is also true in the case of subatomic reactions (T conservation)*.

Or consider this—

An electron moving through a magnetic field pointing in a particular direction will veer to the right. The positron, with an opposite charge, would, when moving in the same direction through the same magnetic field, veer to the left. The two motions are mirror images, so that in this case the shift from a charge to its opposite also produces the same effect as a left-right shift.

Or suppose we reverse the direction of time-flow. An electron moving through a magnetic field may veer to its right, but if a picture taken of the motion and the film is reversed and projected, the electron will seem to be moving backward and, in doing so, will veer to its left. Again, time flow and left-right symmetry are connected.

It would seem, then, that charge conjugation (C), parity (P) and time reversal (T) are all rather closely related and all somehow connected with left-right symmetry. If, then, left-right symmetry breaks down in weak nuclear interaction with respect to one of these, the symmetry can be restored with one or both others.

If a particle is doing something leftward, and its image is doing something rightward, which is impossible (so that the image can be spotted through a breakdown in P conservation), you can reverse the charge on the image-particle and convert the action into a possibility. If the action is impossible even with the reversed charge (so that the image can be spotted through a breakdown in CP conservation) you can reverse the direction of time flow, and then you will find the action *is* possible. In other words there is "CPT conservation" in the weak nuclear interaction.**

The result is that the Universe is symmetrical, as it has always been thought to be, with respect to strong nuclear interactions, electromagnetic interactions and gravitational interactions.

Only weak nuclear interactions have been in question, and there the failure of the law of conservation of parity seemed to introduce a basic asymmetry to the Universe. The broadening of the concept to CPT conservation restored

---

** We can tell the direction of time flow under ordinary conditions easily enough because of entropy-change effects. This produces the equivalent of an asymmetry in time. Where entropy-change is zero, however, as in planetary motions and subatomic events, T is conserved.*

*** Actually, there was some indication in recent years that CPT is not invariably conserved in weak nuclear interactions, and physicists have been examining the possible consequences in rather a perturbed fashion. However, all the returns don't seem to be in here, and we'll have to wait and see.*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the symmetry—but only in theory.

Does CPT conservation actually present us with a symmetrical Universe in practice? As far as P (parity) is concerned, there is an equal supply of rightness and leftness in the Universe. As far as T (time reversal) is concerned, there is also an equal supply of pastness and futureness. But where C (charge conjugation) is concerned, symmetry in practice breaks down.

The most common subatomic particles to be involved in weak nuclear interactions are the electron and the neutrino. For symmetry to exist in practice, then, there should be equal supplies of electrons and positrons and equal supplies of neutrinos and antineutrinos. This, however, is not so.

Certainly, in the solar system, almost certainly throughout our Galaxy, and, for anything we know to the contrary, throughout the entire Universe, there are vast numbers of electrons and neutrinos, and hardly any positrons and antineutrinos.

The Universe then—at least our Universe—or at the very least our section of our Universe—is electronically left-handed, and that may have had an interesting effect on the development of life.

In order to explain that, I must change the subject radically, however, and make a new start. That I will do next month.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Only a few months ago, we opened the July issue with a modest blare of trumpets by announcing a new look in department headings, etc. and explaining computer typesetting.

Very soon after this announcement, our printer asked for a sizable increase in price (this on top of a price increase we had accepted less than a year ago). We were then faced with two alternatives: First, to accept the increase and, without adding pages, raise our price to 75¢ (to cover all increased costs). Second, to move to a less expensive printer, where we could add pages and go to 75¢ with better justification.

Our decision was to move, and this has necessitated some alterations in the new look. More important, we believe, is the fact that we are now able to run sixteen additional pages. So, less graphics, more stories, more good reading. We hope you agree.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Here is the latest – and one of the best – of Zenna Henderson's stories about those extraordinary visitors to Earth, The People. Why has the series remained so popular over the years? Mostly because it is fine entertainment. Partly, perhaps, because we'd like to believe there is a bit of The People in us. "Mankind was supposed to have dominion over all the world." Miss Henderson said once about these stories. "Maybe this is the way things would work if we really did have that dominion."

That Boy

by ZENNA HENDERSON

THERE WAS AN EVIL IN THE land. Maybe we should have known it, but at first it was sort of like an iceberg, just points and ripples. There was nothing big—nothing to put a name to or to struggle against. Just things like ten-year-old Jareb, rising from baptismal waters with a lie on his tongue. The very first words he spoke, even as he spluttered the creek water from his mouth and nose and shook it off his hair, were a lie. Instead of saying "Hallelujah, amen!" as he had been instructed, he gasped, "There's a boy down there! He smiled at me!"

Well, Sister Gail, his mother, just plain cried, right there in front of everyone. She had wrestled so long and so hard with the stubborn spirit of untruth that seemed to possess Jareb, and he had promised so solemnly that after he was cleansed of his sins in the waters, he'd never lie again, plain or fancy. Jareb sloshed up out of the water and ran to her, all dripping as he was, with the hem of his holy garment trailing in the sand and dust so that it wiped mud against his ankles as he went. "Honest, Mamma! It's true! There's a boy down there!"

"Oh, Jareb, Jareb!" Sister Gail hugged him to her, paying no mind to how wet he got her Sunday clothes. She hid her face against his hair so no one could see her tears.

Brother Helon waded out of the pool in the creek. He took hold of Jareb's shoulders and turned him away from Sister Gail. "Those who mock the Lord shall feel the weight of his mighty wrath!" His voice was like an organ rolling heavy darkness

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

against the granite boulders that backed the pool.

"I'm not mocking the Lord!" Jareb's eyes were big and shocked. "It's true! Just think! A boy down there! I didn't know you could smile under water! Where did—"

"Jareb." Sister Gail gathered his hand into hers. Her eyes were dry again and her emotions decently tucked away. "Come change your clothes." They started toward the wagons. She looked back over her shoulder. "I'm sorry, Brother Helon. I thought we had prayed the spirit of untruth from him."

When they were gone, the rest of us looked uneasily at each other, the solemn joy of Baptism Day sullied by Jareb's behavior. Then Sister Ruth started the hymn *Bringing in the Sheaves,* and by the time we got to "—home we come rejoicing—" we *were* rejoicing and looking forward to the big noontime feed that waited in bulging baskets in the back of the wagons. We were plenty ready for food. We fast on Baptismal Day until after the services.

Jareb looked so little and lonesome sitting on a log all by himself, clutching the chunk of corn bread that was all Sister Gail would let him have in the midst of fried chicken and cake, that I stopped by him on my way down to the creek to get the watermelons that had been cooling in the shallows of the creek since the night before.

"Want to come help?" I asked him. He looked up, resigned. "Mamma said to stay here," he said. I caught Sister Gail's eye and jerked my thumb over my shoulder. She hesitated, then nodded. She thinks I'm good for the boy, his dad being dead. She doesn't want him to get too miss-ish.

"She says it's all right," I told him. He put the corn bread down carefully on his log and followed me out of the shadows of the huge cottonwood trees into the blaze of sun.

"Do *you* think I'm lying, Mr. Lambert?" asked Jareb as he trotted along with me. For some reason, everyone Misters me while they Brother and Sister everyone else in the Conclave.

"Well," I said, "if there's a boy down there, he sure goes a long time without breathing."

"Yeah," said Jareb thoughtfully. "Maybe he doesn't have to come up—like a frog. Or maybe he went back the other way."

"Back where?" I asked, scanning the bare hills and the clustered river willows and cottonwoods along the creek.

"To wherever he came from," said Jareb. "We didn't see him get in—"

"*We* didn't see him at all," I reminded him.

Silently we went on down the slope to the creek edge. I fished the watermelons out of the water, spanking them with satisfaction as I handled them. Fine melons! As soon as we got settled down, we'd raised just as good or better. Then there'd be no need to cart all our kitchen

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

truck fifteen miles over the hills from Everly, our closest neighboring settlement.

Jareb spanked the melons too, his head bent to hear the hollow, ripe echoes.

"Listen, Jareb." I said. "Folks are going to expect you to be different, now that you've been baptized. I don't think you'd better go on with this story about a boy. It just makes your mother feel bad and gets you corn bread instead of fried chicken." He opened his mouth to protest. "Wait," I said. "If you think you'll bust if you don't finish talking it out of you, come to the shop and talk to me. I've got big ears." I grinned at him. After a frowning moment, he grinned too.

We both started back, a melon under each arm. Halfway up the slope, I paused to get a better grip on one of the melons and looked back. "—Four, five and two's seven," I counted to myself. "Hmm. Someone got hungry. I brought eight." Then I shrugged and followed Jareb up the slope.

That shrieking kid, Jobie, met us halfway, skidding excitedly down the gravel slope. "Hurry up!" he yelled. "Ever-body's waiting."

"Don't yell," I told him automatically. "We're coming. You go on down and get a couple more. Save us a trip."

"Mom dint tell me to work!" yelled Jobie. "She owny told me to tell you—"

"I'm telling you," I said. "Stop yelling and go get a couple more melons. There are a couple about your size down there."

He glared at me and opened his mouth. I looked at him. He shut his mouth and skidded on down toward the creek. Jareb juggled his melons for a minute and followed me back to the flat. Jobie was as fast as he was loud, and as we laid the melons in the middle of the crowd, Jobie elbowed importantly through with his load. Jareb watched me cut the first one—so crisply ripe that it split ahead of the knife all the way across. The insides glowed as red as campfire coals and that smell of watermelon—like nothing else on earth!—made us all breathe deeper. Jareb, gulping down his mouth-water resolutely turned away.

"I'll go get the other one," he said. He didn't whine, not even with his eyes. Punishment was punishment and he accepted it.

A while later he came back, a melon under each arm. "Two?" I asked. "I thought there was only one left." His mouth opened but he reddened and closed it again. He went back to his log and his chunk of corn bread that by this time was swarming with ants. I glanced at him several times while the rest of us ate the melons, but he seemed absorbed in watching what was going on with his bread.

It was time to pack up for home after we finished the melons, so while the women were clearing the tarps we had eaten on and the men were getting the horses, I strolled over to Jareb and his log.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"What happened down at the creek?" I asked.

"Nothing," he said, reddening again.

"Come on. Out with it." I sat down far enough from the corn bread not to get me any ants. "There was just one melon left."

"There's *still* a melon left," he said.

"Can't be," I said, tallying again in my head. "I only got eight from Everly."

"There's still one," he persisted. "The—" he paused, gulped and went on. "That boy just brought back two because last night he took one of ours and he figgered that wasn't very fair so he brought one back and an extra one to make up for it." Jareb's eyes were pleading. "You *said*—" he gulped again. "You *said* talk to you—" His eyes dropped and he clasped his hands between his pressing knees. "You said—" his shoulders sagged.

My besetting sin flared up in me, shaking my insides. I can be patient without end with dumb brutes that you can't reason with. I handle plenty in my smithy, but human beings who are given the power of reasoning and won't use it— When I felt that I could control my voice, I said, "You're right. I told you to talk to me, but that doesn't mean I intend to countenance your lying—"

"I'm not lying." Tears welled up in his eyes. "I thought you believed me." He flipped the ant-crowded corn bread to the ground and left me sitting alone.

I looked after him—wondering, with one corner of my mind, how long it'd be before I got over wanting to reach for my pipe at times like this. I gave it up along with strong drink when I joined the Conclave. I shook my head and stood up. Then, feeling foolish, instead of going to help with the hitching-up, I went back down to the creek.

There *was* another watermelon, wavering wet-green under the quiet waters of the creek. The ninth melon.

As our short line of wagons curled around the foothills back to the settlement, I wondered again about the wisdom of our choosing this place. It was just another of those points of uneasiness that plagued me. True, there was the year 'round creek. Maybe that was it. There was the creek. After the endless dusty miles with the sun glaring in our eyes and heavy on our laps until the days spun around us in a never-ending glare of weight and heat, the sight of the flowing waters had been like sighting the gates of the Eternal City. So we chose to accept this second of the three places recommended by the scouts the Conclave sent out when we all voted to move West to free ourselves of a world that grinned or frowned or sneered when the Conclavers were mentioned. You can't serve God with one eye on the world and a shoulder always hunched against the next attack. At least so most of the Conclavers thought.

The first place was out in the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

middle of the prairie and fair to see for all its wide miles and farmable land. We could have pastures aplenty for the herds we hoped to build to begin us on our cheese-making which was to be our special ministry to the world. But there were no hills—or trees—or flowing water, except during rainstorms. And because of where we came from, we all felt we'd rather lift up our eyes unto the hills—

We were all fixed to call this green and wet and tall country Gates Ajar. Or Edenside. Or Maketh Glad. Then we found in the land office that it was already named Hellesgate, and no matter what we chose to call it, the red tape was too tangled for them ever to change it. Even finding that it was named for Omer Hellesgate because he mapped it first, didn't cleanse it in our minds. Some wanted to move on, but already we had started putting down roots. And besides, we were so tired—so absolutely worn out. So we stayed. And now I half wondered if the name of the place had had anything to do with Jareb's rising from baptism with a lie on his lips—and his persisting in his error. But then—there was the ninth melon. Even a half lie couldn't account for a melon.

My smithy was the first thing finished in the settlement. It wasn't much more than a lean-to. I had the big idea of digging out a room in the hillside and then having a shed out front, but after I saw how the point of the pick merely whitened a pockmark on the hard surface and scaled off only a pinch of dust, I gave up. Four notched tree trunks held up my roof of branches and brushwood. The open-faced lean-to that protected the forge was made of the branches lopped from the four trees, the chinks mud-filled. Before I became a Conclaver, I wouldn't have been caught dead in such a shop, but I left my wordly pride behind—far behind—on the other side of my baptismal waters. If only I had been cleansed also of my besetting sin! But hearing the ring of the anvil again and having the echo of my hammering coming back to me multiplied from the red and grey mountain walls of Hellesgate, made the thin-with-strangeness country around me begin to fatten up into familiarity. Home was beginning.

Well, the other kids wouldn't let Jareb forget his baptismal day. When there weren't any adults close enough to interfere, they called him Ananias. He mostly shrugged and took it. But one day I had to pull him out from under a whole pile of flailing younguns. I set them skittering with a backhand whack or two and set about sorting Jareb out. He was intact, though considerably roughed up.

"What happened?" I asked him.

"They called her Sapphira," he explained. "They can call me Ananias all they want to, but they can't get away with calling mamma Sapphira. Why'd you chase them off? I was beating up on them!"

"Are you sure they knew that?" I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

asked, whacking the seat of his overalls to jar the dirt off. "I think they thought they were beating up on you!"

"Jobie knows!" said Jareb, spitting blood from a split lip. "He started it. I knocked his teeth out for him!" He caught my skeptical eye. "Well, one tooth. It was loose already."

I took him back to the smithy to wash off the worst of his battle.

"Hey!" he said past his shirttail he was using for a towel. "That boy—"

"What boy?" I asked, setting to work shearing nails from the slender rod of iron.

"That watermelon boy," he offered.

"I thought we'd decided you'd give up your lying—" I paused in my work.

"I'm not lying!" he protested.

"Well, making up tales, then," I said. "If that suits you better."

"I'm not making it up neither! I went back there that night to see about that watermelon, and so did he. And we decided since my mamma told me not to eat any, he wouldn't either. So we buried it under a tree."

I searched his troubled face for a moment. It was plainly real to him, whatever it was. I sighed. Well, so long as it did no evil—

"That boy—" I left the sentence open for him.

"He doesn't have to stay in the water." Jareb's words poured out happily. " 'Member, I thought maybe he was like a fish, but he ain't—isn't. N'en I thought maybe he was like a frog—you know, living in the water and out, but he ai—isn't. He's just a boy."

"Just a boy!" I said. "Down in a pond and never coming up for air—or have you changed that?"

"Oh, but he does come up," protested Jareb. "I asked him. Every half hour, he says, but when he gets big, it will be only every hour. It takes time to learn. Like lifting does. He sure likes to lift."

"Mountains, of course!" I grinned, hard-pressed to keep my patience with his fancy tales. "Or maybe he lifts the pond like a pitcher and pours the water on his garden. Wonderful! Saves ditch-digging."

"No," said Jareb thoughtfully. "Not mountains. I asked him, on account of faith doing it, you know. But that's for grownups and they haven't done any of that since they got here. They're scared to. No, he lifts himself."

"Himself? Well, well!" my voice jeered. "Like bird, I suppose. Flip-flap she flied, huh?"

"No," said Jareb. "He doesn't have to flap to fly. He just—" he waved his hand, "lifts off the ground and goes along. It sure looks fun." He was wistful. "I wish I could."

"Now, listen, Jareb," I said, waiting to catch his eye to make sure I had his whole attention. "You can't go on making things up like this. The more you do, the more likely you are to forget and start one of your tales around some of the others. You've got enough to live down now. Better

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

you and your mother concentrate on truth a little more and grammar a little less. Better pray out this spirit of untruth before it becomes a devouring monster in you."

"A devouring monster!" Jareb was visibly savoring the phrase. "But there's nothing to pray out!" he protested. "You can't pray out the truth, can you?" His eyes were very wide and blue as he looked at me.

"Well," I said slowly. "It *has* been done—so they tell me."

"And you know," Jareb went on, shrugging off all my earnest words. "That boy talks twice."

"Talks twice?" I let myself be drawn back into his story again.

"Yes," said Jareb. "Not as much now as he did at first. He talks something I don't know, then he looks at me and waits, then he talks what I know." He stopped and frowned. "I mean he talks words I know, but he doesn't always make sense."

"Like attracts like," I muttered into his cascade of words.

"Like he said this is an ungood place."

"Ungood?" I glanced up. "You mean evil?"

"No, I asked him if he meant bad. He waited a long time, then he said no, not bad, but good isn't here." Jareb frowned. "Does that make sense?"

"Not to me," I admitted, but the sun wasn't quite so bright on the dirt floor at my feet and my shoulders wanted to shiver.

"He said they tried it first but went away. Then other people came, they went away, too, because good wasn't here."

"Couple of groups have camped here a spell," I mused. "And some fields were cleared once—the creek—"

"Oh, that boy's people make the creek. I mean, make it to run all the time. Before, it only had water once in a while."

"Make the—!" I swallowed hard at my anger. "What about his folks? He has folks, I suppose."

"Sure. He's got lots of them." Jareb smiled. "At the other end of the water."

"Where's that?" I asked.

"I don't know," Jareb admitted. "But that's where they live—the other end of the water. That's where they found a place with good. He showed me some—like dusty salt."

"Now, Jareb," I said, "that's enough. Now you've overreached yourself. You'd better scoot on. I've got work to do. My listener is fresh worn out. Scoot!"

He scooted, heading not home, but toward Benson's. He'd taken quite a shine to their little girl, Tally, a tiny mite about three or four. He asked me once what made dimples work. Tally Benson's got two of the deepest when she smiles, and she's a smiling child.

I glanced across the clearing. He was disappearing into the shade on the far side. I felt vaguely troubled, remembering his words. Others *had* been here before us. Why had they left? Shallow water, flowing creek—

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

They *made* the creek? Neighbors only fifteen miles away. Land easy to plow. Timber for the cutting. A green and pleasant land. What good could there be that was missing here? And yet—the others had gone.

Well, a year went by, and we were starting another. I could hardly stand to think back over the evil time—because there *was* an evil in the land. Slowly but steadily our brotherly love drained away. The Conclave seemed to be fighting for its very life. We were still bound together, but mostly by the miles of wilderness about us and the fact that no one dared pack up and leave for fear of making real the vague uneasiness we all felt. No one wanted to pull out the first brick to bring the house down.

It has been a gradual thing, this weakening of common ties, and it has kept pace, step by step, with the gradual worsening of our physical well-being. It makes you wonder if brother-love depends on how well you happen to be feeling. The very food we eat seems to have paled and lost flavor. Speaking for myself, the only times I feel like my old self is when I go to Everly for what food supplies we still can't produce for ourselves. Seems to me that everything about the world brightens up when I leave the Conclave.

It was after the beginning of the second year, when I was working my stint on building the meeting house fence with Jonadab and Darius, that things really began to come apart.

I stopped my post-hole digging to catch my breath. I shook my head as I wiped the sweat from my forehead—winded by a little digging! I wasn't that old! I wasn't even old at all! I drew a quavery breath and went back to my digging.

"This is an evil place," said Jonadab, flatly, grunting as he helped Darius lift the post and slide it into the hole. Helped Darius! When we started this fence, Darius wrastled the posts around like stove wood. "Our stock's poorer now than when we got here. Nobody can get milk enough from their cows for their own family. I thought we were supposed to turn into a cheese-producing colony with all our dairy cattle we were to grow and Brother Helon knowing all the ways from the old country—"

"Cheese—" Jonadab tamped the dirt into the post hole with his shovel handle. "We haven't had butter for a week. Milk looks like old Bess separated it before we ever got a chance at it."

"Our hens are laying like molting season," said Darius. "C'n put a thumb through the egg shells too. 'S a wonder the hens get them laid whole."

"Benson's youngun's going into a decline," I said, staggering off-balance because my pick hit hard rock where we'd planned another post-hole. "She didn't even have a smile for me this morning when they brought Blinky in to be shod. Looks like you could *blow* through her without puckering up, even."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Maybe we should move on—" Dab straightened his back in sections, his hand pressing the hurt. "There was another place—"

"Pull up stakes again?" Darius shifted his thin shoulders under his overall straps. "The wife had her heart half pulled out her, leaving the home place. She'd never pack up again, even for the Conclave. Awful hard on her, this whole thing. Aged something awful of late. Starting to lose her teeth— 'Sides, all the crops are in again. This year's gotta be better. Dunno though. Creek's been pretty much come and go lately—slacking off then coming again. If it doesn't come back some time—"

The sound of hooves shifted our attention to the trail that was slowly becoming a road. "There's a horse that's not failing." Dab's voice was unduly sharp.

"Hi yuh!" called Jareb as he trotted up on Prince. His legs were hardly long enough to curve the horse's fat sides. He had a basket clutched in front of him. "Mamma wonders can you come up, Mr. Lambert. She's kinda wincy about being alone there with Bessie having her calf. She's big enough it might be twins."

"All right, Jareb," I said, dropping my pick and reaching for my coat. "Didn't realize her time was close. You go on back. I'll be there."

"Gotta take these eggs to Mrs. Benson first," he said. "They're for Tally." He trotted off.

I shrugged and headed for my shop.

"Eggs to spare." Dab's voice followed me. "That kid's not wasting away neither!" Venom tipped his tongue. I turned and walked back slowly. I stood and looked at Dab a moment.

"You make it sound like it's wrong for a kid and his horse to be healthy. And for a neighbor to oblige another neighbor with foodstuff."

Dab colored, but he looked me right back. "You're naming it wrong," he said. "But so're some others. Abigail Curtis is a woman alone. There are them that say she shouldn'ta come along with us—especially after she wouldn't take—" He stopped and wet his dry lips with a slow tongue.

"Wouldn't take you," I said.

"Wouldn't take a husband," said Dab. "Like she doesn't need a man around. And that farm of hers, up there on that flat by itself, looking like—like *ours* oughta look. She hasn't had any more help from us than any other of us—but look! Hand of righteousness isn't the only hand that can help in this world. And *she* ain't losing no teeth. *She* ain't got a child going into a decline. *She* ain't got stock wasting away. *She* ain't got hens not laying!"

"One thing she has got," Darius interrupted. "She's got a son that rises from the waters of baptism with lies on his tongue and deceit in his mouth—"

"The wicked flourish like a green bay tree," said Dab solemnly.

"If you think evil is among us," I reminded him, "it is your duty to go

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to Brother Helon and warn him so he can warn the Conclave and prepare us to be purged of all unrighteousness!"

Dab stepped back from me though I had kept my voice soft to hold bound the leaping demon within me.

"If I don't, someone else will," he said stoutly. "The sinner shall not sit in the congregation—"

"Let's get this straight," I said, squaring my sagging shoulders with an effort. "You're saying Sister Gail is flourishing because she is evil? And she's evil because she keeps herself to herself—"

"As far as we know," said Dab stubbornly. "How do we *know* she's keeping herself to herself?" His arm flew up defensively when he caught sight of my face. "It's been known!" he cried, his voice shriller and shriller. "Women giving themselves to the Devil! All I know is she is prospering and the rest of us are failing. Why? Are we evil? Have we sinned in the sight of God? And she hasn't? Are we evil or is she?"

I swallowed a wild shout of laughter at the idea of Abigail Curtis giving herself to the Devil for the gift of eggs and productive cows! Then as quickly, I remembered how very small the mess of pottage is that lots of people sell their birthrights for. I swallowed hard, groping for grace to make a right answer.

"Is it necessary for either to be evil?" I asked. "Couldn't it be—"

"Couldn't it be what?" asked Darius heavily.

"I don't know," I said helplessly. "I don't know. Maybe that this is an ungood place—"

Jareb came back just then, shifting easily with Prince's long, slow stride. Jareb was frowning. "Tally sure looks bad. Her mother says she won't eat nothin'—anything—any more. What's wrong with her, Mr. Lambert?"

"Don't know," I said, shortly. "Come on. Prince'll carry double as far as my place." I bellied across Prince behind Jareb and straightened up, straddling the horse, steadying Jareb and me as Prince danced sideways under my added weight.

"I'm going to tell mamma about Tally," Jareb said. "She looks real bad."

It was twins. Two wobbly-legged heifer calves. I leaned on the rail fence and looked at Bessie who had serenely and competently gone about the business of birthing her young as though twins were commonplace. Sister Gail came to the corral and leaned her arms on the top rail with me.

"Twins!" she was pleased. "And both heifers! Surely Providence has smiled on us!"

"Truly," I said solemnly. "In the last two months, three cows have aborted and two newborn calves barely breathed before they died."

Her smile died slowly. "So I heard," she said. "A heavy loss to the settlement. Then surely this is a blessing to be shared. Praise to our Father."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Amen," I said, suddenly startled as I realized how separate Sister Gail had become of late. Was the Conclave shouldering her out? Or was she withdrawing because of—of what? I watched a whisp of her hair blow across her cheek as she looked again at the livestock. Not evil! I swore to myself. Not evil!

I was so sick from thinking about what Dab had said about Sister Gail and with my own physical coming-apart that I wasn't fit to be lived with for the next couple of weeks. I went to Brother Helon about Dab. He looked at me with a half smile, hampered by his strained breathing.

"Brother Jonadab came to me about the matter also," he said. "We all have our burdens to be born patiently. Your's is Brother Jonadab. Brother Jonadab's is his unbridled imagination. In all forebearance—" His words were broken by the strangling tightening of his breath. When he could speak again he said, "Would God felt me worthy of the gift of health such as he has given to Sister Gail—"

I hadn't seen Jareb for quite a while, and it had to be the day my demon took possession of me and led me to shout and curse at Jonadab over some trifle connected with a saddle—I couldn't even remember what I was yelling about after I cooled down—that Jareb chose to arrive again. I was in the smithy pumping the bellows, watching the iron bar I held in the heat of the forge turning slowly from red to white-hot, wondering if it was any hotter than the rage that had sucked and torn shapelessly at my insides—and still threatened to blaze again. I grunted when Jareb came in and, carrying the bar to the anvil, began shaping it, the white heat shimmering up against my face. But the shaping was more work than pleasure, as all effort was of late. My muscles were protesting the effort already.

Jareb sat down on Dab's saddle he'd dropped by the door when he fled my wrath.

"That boy," he said casually. "He still comes down there."

"What boy," I said, pacing my hammer to my words. "Down where?"

"You know. The watermelon pond," he said. "I saw him again yesterday. He gave me some more salt with the dusty stuff on it—that good."

"*That* boy!" My demon flared up explosively. I hit the bar so hard and awkwardly that I lost hold of it completely. It shot off the anvil and sizzled against my leather apron before it dropped to the cindery dirt floor. My wrist, banging against the apron, sizzled too. Rage roared up in every aching bone in me like a black fountain. "Take your lies somewhere else!" I roared so loud that Jareb flattened his eyelids like in a high wind.

"I told him about Tally," Jareb went on stubbornly. "He says it's 'cause she doesn't get any good and for me to give her some. It keeps us from getting sick—mamma and me. I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

could put it in a cup of water. It isn't nasty. If her mother—"

"Listen, Jareb," I said, sagging against the anvil, waiting for my sight to clear and my heart to stop jerking my breath. I nursed my burned wrist in my other hand. "Leave Tally alone. Get over there and get those bellows to going. I've got this whole job to start over. Git!"

And he got. Pumping the bellows, working up the heat again on the forge. I lifted the bar with my pincers and jabbed it down into the glowing, fluctuating center of the coals.

"Long time ago," grunted Jareb as he pumped, "he gave me this funny salt."

"Salt for a dickeybird's tail!" I jeered sourly.

"No, to put in the water pail." Jareb flicked sweat from his nose. "He said the dust was the good that isn't here."

"Jareb," I said slowly from between clenched teeth. "Go—away!"

"But you said pump—" he was bewildered.

"And now I say go away. Go away with your frog boy and your dickeybird's tail!"

"But I—" he began, wide-eyed.

"Go!" I roared.

He went.

I pulled down viciously on the bellows handle. Above the creak of the leather, I heard him call, "And in the water for the stock—and in the irrigation head gate, too!"

The nightmare began closing in tighter and tighter after that. Nobody died, but they either stayed inside with their sufferings or were creeping, bent shadows in the sun, slowly moving. Sister Gail stayed up on the flat. How can you come down among the people when they look through you and don't hear you and let the foodstuff you bring wither on the front step?

Finally came the day I sat outside my smithy, too sick and worn even to pretend to work. I caught Jareb as he cut through the field on his way to the Benson's. I sat on a tree stump in front of the smithy, flexing a dry pine twig in my two shaking hands.

"Jareb," I said, "remember you said that boy said good wasn't here?"

"Yeah," Jareb was a bit cautious. This was the first time I'd ever started a 'boy' conversation.

"Did—I mean—" I snapped the twig sharply. "Why is it you and your mother aren't ailing like the rest of us? Did that boy—I mean—"

"You told me not to talk about it any more." Jareb's face reddened.

"Talk now," I said, tasting the subtle salt of my own bleeding gums. "Has he told you why we are all dying?"

"Dying?" Jareb's eyes widened. "Are we dying?"

"Look," I said. I held out my right hand—a smithy's hand with big knuckles and thick calluses and heavy tendons—made to grip and lift and use. And we both watched the increasing tremor that shook it harder and harder until I finally hid it between my knees.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Like I told you," said Jareb. "He brought me some of that salt-looking stuff. That's what it is—dusty salt. But he says the dust is the good."

"The dust is the good." I sighed heavily. But then, had Jareb ever told me a lie that I could prove was a lie? "Go on."

"He said his Daddy said he could bring it to me. He said some was salty to use instead of salt when we eat, but some is just to put in drinking water for us and the stock and in the irrigation water."

"And then—?"

"That's all." He spread his hands. "That's all."

"Jareb," I ran my tongue around my tender mouth. "Have you got any of that salt with you?"

"Sure," said Jareb promptly. He fished in his pants pocket. "Here's some." He handed me a rag tied into a tight little bundle. "It's what I wanted to give to Tally but nobody would let me. So I carry it around in case I find something to eat somewhere. You can have it."

"Your mother won't care?" I asked, suddenly bitterly ashamed.

"Naw!" scoffed Jareb. "She doesn't care—we got plenty. I'da offered sooner but—"

"Thanks," I said. "I'm sorry I've been so mean to you, Jareb. And not just because you gave me this. I was sorry already—before."

"Aw!" Jareb reddened. "Never mind. I'm going to see Tally. She worries me. Last time Sister Ruth wouldn't let me talk to her. She was sleeping."

I untied the packet after he left. I touched my finger to my tongue, to the salt, to my tongue again. It was. Just dusty salt. But two days later, after using it with my meals and in my drinking water, my eyes opened without my having to pry the gummy lids apart in the morning. The next afternoon my gums stopped oozing blood under the pressure of my fingertip, and the burn on my wrist, left from my tantrum with Jareb, had visibly begun to heal. A week later, back in my smithy in the clear sharpness of a sunrise, I let my hammer fall on the anvil with a joyous *chank* that splintered to echoes against the mountains beyond.

Darius and Dab came down to the smithy that evening to find out what was happening. They had heard me off and on all that day. I told them about the dusty salt. I showed them my healed scars. I beat a tattoo on my anvil with my second-heaviest hammer. I showed them some of the salt—a small box Jareb had brought me last night.

"I'll share with you," I said, as a Christian brother should. "I think I can get us some more."

"Evil—" Darius shook his head, his lips sucking in where his teeth used to be. "Lead us not into—"

"Dope," said Dab through his cracked lips. "Makes you feel good for a spell, then kills you."

I felt a sudden flare inside me. I closed the box slowly. "By their fruits—" I reminded them. "A good tree can't bear bad fruit."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But they wouldn't even touch it. I watched them shamble gingerly off. They had to rest twice before they were out of sight.

An hour later I met Sister Ruth coming out of the meeting house. She had been crying, and her hand, clutching her shawl under her chin, was like a claw. One wild strand of grey hair scraped her ravaged cheek. She had been twenty-five her last birthday. She was a shattered forty in the fading evening light.

"Sister Ruth!" I said, "how is Tally?"

"Dying," she said hoarsely, "I hope. I bin in there to dedicate her to Death. A quick, merciful death." She turned her face away.

"Let me help—" I said, touching her sagging shoulder.

"I heard," she whispered hastily, slipping like a shadow from under my hand. "I heard about the salt but the mister won't let me listen. That's why I'm giving her willingly to Death. He won't let me try to help. Why should I keep her suffering?" and she was gone.

Jareb was waiting for me at my shop—a restless shadow in the deeping darkness.

"What are you doing here this time of night?" I asked him. "You should be home. Your mother—"

"Mr. Lambert," he burst into my reprimand. "Is Tally really dying? They wouldn't even let me in the house. They chased me away. Is she *dying?*"

"I don't know," I admitted. "Sister Ruth thinks so."

"I tried to give Sister Ruth some good for her, but she's scared of Brother Rual. Mr. Lambert, do they really think I want to give something bad to Tally? To hurt her?"

"They're hurting so bad themselves that they can't think straight about anything," I said. "You better scoot on home. Your mother will be worried."

"But they *can't* just let her die!" cried Jareb. "How can they not—"

"Do you think they want her to die?" I asked heavily. "You'd better go on home."

Jareb hesitated a moment, then faded soundlessly into the dark. I sat there on the edge of my anvil for a long time, letting the darkness flood me inside and out. I was finally roused by the sound of voices and the soft thudding of feet along the trail.

"Hello, there!" I called.

The voices cut off. I moved toward the dark huddle in the shadow of the path. "Who's there? Where you headed?"

"Don't tell *him* nothing!" Dab's slurred voice was venomous. "Consorting—"

"Dab," I snapped. "Don't be any more of a fool than you have to be. What's going on? Wait. Let me get some light on the subject."

I stirred the banked coals in the forge with a pitchy pine stick and laid a couple of others across when flame leaped up. Pale ovals of faces came out of the dark.

"Sister Ruth!" I reached out a hand to her faltering, stricken face.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Brother Rual struck my hand down feebly. "Don't touch my woman!" he snarled. "Evil—!"

"*What's* going on?" I demanded. "Sister Ruth, is Tally—worse?"

"Tally's gone." Her flat voice was choked with grief.

"Dead?" I cried. "But—"

"We don't know if she's dead or not!" Sister Ruth cried. "She's gone! She's gone! She's gone!" Her tautly clasped hands swung up to hide her anguished face in the crook of one elbow.

"Gone?" My mind whirled blankly. "But where—"

"We got a good idea where!" It was Dab's snarl. "And we know who! Leave us be, you devil-lover!"

It was no trick for me to outdistance them in the dark. Nor to tell where they were headed. The only house above was Sister Gail's. I knew my way through the wood lot as well as I did by road, and I lost the group behind me before they could get started again. I was across the front porch of the house with one stride, the flat of my hand heavy on the door. It was unlatched and swung open to the shove of my shoulder.

Jareb and Sister Gail looked up, frightened, as I plunged in. Sister Gail held Tally on her lap, a Tally so wasted and limp in the flicker of the candle that she looked dead to me. Her chin was wet and Jareb was holding a dripping cup.

"Jareb! What in the name of—" I began.

With one quick swoop, Jareb dropped the cup and swept Tally up into his arms. "I won't let them take her back to die!" he cried. "But she won't drink! Mr. Lambert, what'll we do!"

"You'd better think of something fast," I said. "Dab and Darius and Rual and I don't know who all else are coming! Jareb, you can't pull a fool thing like this. You've got to—" I stopped trying to push words into unopened ears and turned to Sister Gail.

"Sister Gail! They're ready to kill—"

"But Jareb says this powder will save her. It has kept us healthy—at least he says so—"

"He *stole* the child, Sister Gail! Don't you realize what your son—*Jareb!*" I caught just the flicker of his heels as he slipped out the back door into the dark—with Tally.

"I'll get him!" I cried. "Fasten that door, Sister Gail! Don't let them in—"

I stumbled to a halt beyond the house, searching in the darkness. Where had that fool kid gone? Then I heard the snap of a branch on the hill above me. He was cutting across to the creek. The creek! The watermelon pond.

I took out after him. I should have been able to catch him—burdened as he was—but he had the same advantage of me as I had had of the others—he knew every step of the way, even in the dark. Before I could plunge down to the pond, he was there, wading out, slipping and stumbling with Tally clutched tightly to him.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Jareb!" I called. "Jareb! Wait!"

"Don't stop me, Mr. Lambert!" he cried. "Don't try to stop me. Tally will die unless—"

"Are you sure she's not dead already?" I panted, moving slowly down to the water's edge. Jareb's head bent sharply to his burden.

"She's still breathing," he said in relief. "Oh, Mr. Lambert! What if it *is* too late to save her—"

"Jareb, you must be crazy," I said. "You can't steal a child like this! Bring her back before her dad gets hold of you. If anything happens to her, they'll call it murder—"

Jareb backed away from me, deeper into the pond. "I gotta do something!" he said. "I'm going to take her to that boy's people."

"That boy!" I sagged with despair. "Jareb, there *isn't* any boy! You can't take her to someone who doesn't exist—"

"If there isn't any boy, where did I get the good I gave you!" cried Jareb. "How come you aren't sick any more like the rest of them? There is so that boy!"

"Then where are his people?" I asked, inching forward. "And what makes you think they can do anything—"

"If they know where to get the good, then they ought to know how come it works and maybe they know some way to make Tally take it. And they live at the other end of the water! I told you already!"

"Fine," I said, moving ankle-deep into the water. "Now all you have to do is turn fish and get there."

"I'll get there," said Jareb, backing away. "That boy told me how. You only have to be underwater right here, and you don't have to hold your breath very long. N'en you get in a tunnel and it goes to the end of the water. And he said it isn't far in the tunnel, but you have to use roads and horses outside and go up and down; so it's lots longer."

We looked at each other across the shimmer of the dark water. Then Jareb said, "Mr. Lambert, I know that boy's people can make Tally well. Tell mamma I'll be back as soon as I can. Tell Sister Ruth I'll take good care of Tally, and I'll bring her back as soon as I get her well. Please don't be mad, Mr. Lambert. I gotta take her! I'll bring her back well."

"Jareb!" I caught him with my voice. "If you're going to take Tally underwater, hold your hand tight over her nose and mouth until you come up."

He fumbled for Tally's face, turned with her clasped close, and plunged down into the dark waters. I stood and watched the waters churn and roll. I watched them quiet and smooth to a dull mirror of the sky. I wondered as I sloshed out of the water and started back up the hill—had he disappeared into the waters as he had risen from them—with a lie on his lips?

I got back to Jareb's house as fast as I could, my heart torn for Sister Gail. What if that scraggly mob had been able to give each other strength enough to do her some harm? The

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

place was dark and silent. I stumbled across the porch.

"Sister Gail!" I called. "Gail!" She wasn't there. I groped for the candle on the mantel. It was gone. I bent to stir the fire. In its flicker I found the broken candle lying on the braided hearth rug. I hunched to the heat of the coals and lifted the lighted candle to look at the room. It told me nothing I didn't already know. Gail was gone. Willingly? Had she gone willingly? Or had she been dragged by the scrawny, feverish bite of sick fingers?

I pelted back downhill to my smithy. Where now? I paused, groping in the dark with my eyes. Where could she be? I gulped for breath and started down the path. A shadow slid out of the dark.

"That's far enough." Dab's voice was a scared loudness. "Don't come no farther!"

"Where's Sister Gail?" I demanded. "Dab, if you've done her harm—" I started forward.

"No farther!" screeched Dab. "I got my shotgun on you!" There was a breathless pause, then Dab snickered. "Gotta shaky trigger finger, too. Might squeeze anytime. Can't control my fingers like I usta."

"Where is she?" I demanded and started forward.

"Far enough," he snarled. "Don't make me kill you. Back it up."

I did, but I persisted. "Where is she?"

"Where's Tally?" he retorted.

"I don't know," I said truthfully. "I didn't catch Jareb."

"We caught Sister Gail." Dab's snicker was old and tired. "Gonna trade you straight across."

"Trade?" I asked.

"Trade," said Dab. "Her for Tally."

"But I haven't got Tally!" I said.

"Jareb has," said Dab.

"But I don't know where he is!" my voice was rising.

"We know where Sister Gail is," said Dab softly. "And we're keeping her there till Tally gets back. You want her, bring us Tally. Straight-across trade—dead or alive."

"What're you doing to her?" I demanded.

"Nothing." Dab's voice was moving away. "Just nothin'. Oh, 'ceptin' water to drink, of course. We're still disputin' about bread. Some say yes and some say no. She could live off her fat for a month, *some* say. Some say let her eat our bread and be like us!"

"Dab!" I called, "you're crazy, every one of you!"

"We feel crazy," he said. "Some say yes and some say no. I say why bother to feed her? Tally's dead. We're dead. Make her dead, too!"

"Dab, you've gotta—" Then I realized there was no one in the shadows any more.

I stumbled wearily back to my bed in the smithy lean-to, my years and the past months catching up with me. I huddled into myself on the edge of my cot. "God—" I started to tell him about it. "God—" My face crumpled behind my hands. "Gail!" I suddenly admitted that she

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

wasn't sister to me any more. Despair surged up in me like a gushing freshet. Driven by a sort of delirium, I started for the pond. Then I staggered back toward the huddle of the settlement. Then veered towards the Curtis place. When rational thinking came back. I was huddled in my smithy again, trying to warm my chilled soul through hands held over the banked, crinkling coals of my forge. I groped my way to the back of the lean-to to my cot that had served me except in the very coldest weather of last winter. Whatever I had to do—find Gail. Find Jareb. Find Tally—alive—I had to have light to do it by. Gail could be hidden anywhere, in anyone's house, in any of the shacks or lean-tos or sheds. Or in the meeting house—a thousand places. Search would have to wait for light. And Jareb and Tally. Soon enough when light came to grope for their floating drowned bodies—or to drown myself trying to follow where they went.

I lay back with a sigh that was mostly a weary groan, blinked my hot, staring eyes—and opened them, hot and staring, to full daylight and a cold dawn breeze stiffening my cramped, hanging knees.

The pool was still in shadow when I got there. The red bluff in back of it shouldered out the early morning sun. I felt the chill of the waters bite up to my thighs as I waded in, almost to the bluff. I leaned and groped in the water. I felt the slacked flow of a current against my hands. I don't know what happened then, but I felt the despair in me die, cooled perhaps in the flow of the water, the clean blueness of the early sky, and the first shaft of sun past the shoulder of the bluff.

I waded back to shore with a last look in case there was a floating body—or two. This after all, was the creek that gave us our drinking water—if it didn't forget to flow again after one of the more-frequent stoppages we had had recently. I climbed back up the hill and went to the Curtis place and methodically did the morning chores. Livestock has to be taken care of. I carried the two brimming buckets of milk back to the settlement with me. I put them on the steps of the meeting house and went into the chill shadow inside. I looked around me. There was no hiding place—quite literally. I looked under the benches that spanned the one bare, barn-like room and went back out. I left the milk where it was, hoping someone would find it, and started through the settlement.

I knocked at every door—and not one opened to me. I searched every place I could, and saw not a soul, living or dead. I doubled back past the meeting house on my way to the Curtis place. The two milk buckets lay on their sides, the milky mud around them hardening in the sun. A scrap of ragged kitten fur crouched at the corner of one splotch and bumped a hopeful, searching nose against the stiffening dust.

Night came. From my vantage

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

point on Curtis' front porch I had seen movement in the settlement. The flip of a skirt in a chicken yard—the slow movement of cows to their milking places, but no sound came to me except from behind the house where I sat.

I had made my decision. If I didn't find Gail by morning, I was going to Everly and get help. Then we'd come back and turn this Godforsaken settlement inside out until we found her. Oh, God! Help me find her! I scratched my head painfully. Then I looked at my hand. Scratching again? I was suddenly conscious that I had been trying to reach an itch for some time. But I wasn't getting to it. My hand went up involuntarily again—but my skull was between me and the itch.

I snorted a half laugh at myself as I tried to go back to my prayer. Talk about minds wandering! In the midst of the worst worry I'd had since I joined the Conclave, I got an itch I couldn't scratch! And it kept me from prayer—well, prayer's a lot of things besides words. I got up and started back toward the pond. I'd try again. Maybe someone would be going to take her bread—or water—

I pulled up abruptly. If I was looking for Gail, what was I doing hiking over the hill in the half darkness to the pond? I hesitated, my hand reaching up again to that odd itch, stubbing my fingers on skull again. I plunged down the darkening hillside.

"Mr. Lambert—"

I swear I learned in one split second what they mean by jumping out of your skin!

"Jareb—!" I gritted toward his vague shadow, gulping my jagged breath. "If you ever again—!"

"I didn't mean to scare you," said Jareb. "I just wanted to tell you to tell mamma that Tally drank a whole cup of milk this morning, and—"

"Where is she?" I snapped. "Even overnight isn't long enough for you to get anywhere and back. There's nothing and no one for fifteen miles—"

"We didn't go all the way." His voice was apologetic. "That boy was going to take us to his home so he lifted us—"

"Did what?" I rapsed.

"He—he was going to take us to his home, and it would be faster with no feet—"

"Jareb! Jareb!" He caught the exasperated anger in my voice.

"It's true," he cried. "That boy can—"

"That boy can take a running jump—"

"He called you!" shrilled Jareb. "He called you with no words and you came!"

"He called—" My hand tried to reach that feeling again—

"Over here, Mr. Lambert." That boy's voice was just a boy voice, but being convulsed by shock twice in one evening was almost the end of me. I was glad for the rough support of the jack pine behind my shaken back. That boy was just a boy to look at, too, and he dug the same sort of hole in the sand with the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

twisting toe of his shoe that any embarrassed boy does. Then he went out! Like a snuffed candle! And I realized that somehow he had quite literally been lighted up so I could see him. I felt numb.

"So if you'll tell mamma—"

"She's gone," I said flatly.

"Where to?" asked Jareb, startled. "Did she go to look for me?"

"She didn't go," I said. "They took her. They've got her locked up somewhere. They want to trade her for Tally."

"But you can't," cried Jareb. "Tally's gotta stay—"

"You tell them," I suggested. "They don't hear me."

"Well, then, when Tally's better, we can trade," said Jareb.

"They aren't going to feed your mother," I said. "I think maybe they'll give her water, though."

"Not going to feed—!" Jareb's eyes flashed white at me in the heavy dusk. "They can't—"

"You tell them," I repeated.

"All right, then," said Jareb. "If they're going to be mean, I'll take mamma back with me—to Tally."

"First catch your mother!" I smiled mirthlessly over the old receipt. We were in a bad enough stew, heaven knows.

"That boy can," said Jareb. "That boy can sure do a lot of things. His name's Theo. Hey! You know where they live? You know where it is? I mean it's the other end of the water, but do you know where it really is? And Theo says the pump works backwards so's they can—"

"Your mother," I broke in on his senseless babble, weariness dissolving my knees and elbows.

"Let's go get her," said that boy—I mean Theo.

"You go," I said. "I'll follow."

And he did go. And I did follow—a crazy path that wound around every structure in the settlement, same as I had already. But this path was always semivisible for one more step ahead of me—and one more step and one more—And at each structure, Theo would pause a moment, then shuffle his feet and say "Nope" and we'd go on. Finally we finished the last—the meeting house, and Theo said the final "Nope."

Wordlessly we went back up to Jareb's house. We didn't go in. We didn't even go up on the porch. We huddled in the dark in the tangled grass under the salt cedar trees. Even the path light was gone. I heard Jareb gulp and sniff. Then Theo squatted down.

"Tell me you mamma again," he said. "Tell me her worried and sorry."

"But I can't *tell* worried and sorry," protested Jareb, squatting down too.

"No words," said Theo. "Just think worried and sorry for your mamma."

I presume that's what Jareb did for the next few minutes. Anyway, in the silence that's what I did—thought worried. Then Theo grunted.

"Now," he said, "think *you* the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

scaredest you've ever been in all your life. Think scared to death!" It only took half a minute of silence to send Jareb tight up against my shins, shaking and whimpering, and to hear Theo whisper in awe, "Adonday veeah!" or some such sound.

"All right!" said Theo, a little shaken in his breath. "Now I think I'm patterned—"

"What's going on?" I asked. "What are you—"

"I'm not very good at it." Theo's voice was apologetic. "I guess I haven't paid attention when I should've. He told me his mamma so I'll know her when I find her—she'll be sorry and worried—and I got him so I can make her find us because she'll think harder if she thinks he's scared—"

"But that doesn't—" I began.

"Words!" Theo's voice was shrill as he shot to his feet. "Why do all of you have to have words all the time! No wonder Tally's almost untimely Called! No wonder his mamma's lost—" His voice cut off sharply. Then he said quietly, "I'm sorry. I have no right to add hurting to your hurting. Let's start. Give me your hands."

I groped my hand towards him and clutched Jareb's with the other. We made a tight little triangle in the darkness, and I heard his voice, serene and soft, "We are gathered together in Thy Name—"

"Amen," I whispered.

"Amen," whispered Jareb. "Why?"

Then Theo squatted down again and for a long time we listened to the stirring of the needles above us and the blades about us. Then Theo's breath caught and he said, "There! There! Jareb, think to her hard! Where is she?"

"Mamma!" Jareb clutched my arm, his voice hoarse and terrified. "Mamma! Where are you! Mamma!" And he began to sob the hard, ugly sobs of someone unused to crying.

"Where is she?" I asked tensely.

"Under—under the ground!" said Theo.

My whole soul collapsed and the blackness around me began to waver.

"Under the ground!" wailed Jareb. "She's dead! She's dead!"

"Don't be a silly *toolah!*" snapped Theo. "How could she think under the ground if she was dead? Be still!" There was another tense silence and then he murmured. "Shut in like a beast. Dirt falls down. Too hard to dig. It fell. It all fell. He'll come. When morning comes, he'll come. My—my boy, my boy, my—" He turned to me. "Where is she?" he asked, his face a pale oval. "Every time she thinks of where she is, she thinks of you, only not your name. But it's you—and warm—and strong—"

"Thinks of me!" I felt my face flush in the dark. Then I put aside my personal astonishment and set my mind to our problem. "Where is she? Under the ground—under the ground—*in* the ground—" That picture was different. My voice quickened. "Jareb, it could be *in* the ground! In a root cellar or—or—"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"We went to them all," reminded Jareb tearfully. "Even the one Dab—I mean Brother Jonadab started by the meeting house."

"Yeah," I slumped again. "Theo, can't you give me anything else to go on? Anything?"

"It's kinda hard," said Theo hesitantly. "I don't know what will help. I have to take your thinking and get words from Jareb and make talking for you before—"

"Dirt falls down," I recounted. "Too hard to dig—and me—something to do with me—anything else, Theo! *Anything!*"

"Well—uh—" Theo fumbled. "Oh, now she's—she's—no, it's not singing—look in at the open door. They love to see the something, something and hear the bellows roar—' "

"Look in at the open door—" I stood slowly. "Come on," I said. "Come on!" I shouted. "Get going!" I skidded down the slope of the hill, half on my heels, half sitting. A bush whacked me across the eyes stingingly, making the dim outlines around us swim in protective tears. Behind me clattered the boys.

"Where—where—?" I heard Theo gasp.

"Dunno," jerked Jareb. "Dunno!"

"Mist-er Lam-bert," gasped Theo. "They will hear. They will come!"

I stopped. The two boys slid into the backs of my outstretched arms. We listened until the last of the pebbles rattled to rest below us. Until the last tentative echo dissolved against the far hillside. Then we moved on silently, silently. The path light was with us again, barely bright enough to be visible. Sometimes it flicked around erratically; then Theo would mutter and it would steady again. I lowered myself down the face of the drop-off at the bottom of the hill and lifted my arms to help the boys. Jareb grunted and lurched against me down to the level. And Theo came down at the same time, disturbing no rock, because he touched not one—nor me. "It could be fun," I thought. "Just to lift up and go along—"

"Where we going?" whispered Jareb. "Where we going, Mr. Lambert?"

"To the smithy," I said. "Don't you remember the poem your mother made you learn last winter out of your reader—Under the spreading—"

"Yeah—yeah—I guess so—" Jareb wasn't much of a poetry lover.

I stumbled into my smithy and peered around. "But I slept here last night!" I remembered deflatingly.

"*In* the ground, Mr. Lambert," reminded Jareb.

I yanked my cot away from the hillside. "It was too hard to dig—" I found myself echoing Theo's words. "But where? Theo, can you find her again?" I asked.

"Wait." I slumped on the edge of my cot as I felt Theo wiggle and slump down to his squat again. "Jareb, call your mamma. No—no! Not words! Call to her hard inside your head." I heard the rustle of Jareb squatting down, too. After an endless silence, I heard Jareb's sniff

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and unhappy gulp, and felt him collapse sideways into a huddle against my legs. Then, without warning, I felt myself snatched up into a shining stream of something that pulled me out of me and shot me away from me like a spark struck from an anvil, and I knew–there was no sight or hearing or feeling, only knowing–I knew Gail was sobbing Jareb's name and mine. She was huddled over her dried-mud-caked shoes and dabbled skirts, sobbing and clutching the bent little lard pail that hadn't been refilled since she had been shoved roughly into–into–

"Thank you, God," I gulped aloud. "Thank you, God."

"Amen," said Jareb. "What for?"

And Theo echoed, "Amen."

"The water hole," I said. "They've shut her up in the cave above the water hole."

"But there's no way to shut it up," protested Jareb.

"She's shut up there anyway," I said.

We had to go the long way around. My smithy was actually built on the edge of the creek, but you'd never know it. The bank and the rise behind my cot dropped off sheerly down to the creek, which was in a wash nearly a hundred feet below my shop. When we first arrived in the settlement, we had pastured all our livestock together and had used the pool below my shop as a watering place. The swirling action of the sometimes heavy flood waters down the creek had scoured out a big pothole that made a natural water hole. A cave had been worn out of the hillside, too, but it was never under water except, I suppose, in the highest of the floods. We had stabled our livestock there for a while behind a quick fence of cottonwood and salt cedar branches.

But why, I wondered as we rounded the hill and started our rattling, scrambling slide down the creek path, the eerie light showing us our way, why was Gail staying there? Why didn't she get out or holler or something? Unless they had tied her–in a blind flare of helpless rage, I jumped the last drop-off and staggered back against the bank, my feet squishing in mud.

I looked around me. I checked the creek. And the trees. And the hills beyond. I was in the right place, but where was the pond? The cave? Gail!

"It's not there!" cried Jareb. "The cave's gone! Mr. Lambert where's–mamma! Mamma!" He threw himself against me and I staggered back, holding him and me up by the clutch of my hand across his shoulders.

"So that's why," I thought dully. "Be quiet, Jareb," I said. "Bawling won't help any. The hill's caved in and covered up the cave." The tinkling fall of a pebble and a small funneling of a thin line of silt underlined the silence.

"Mamma!" cried Jareb. "She's dead!"

"She's not either!" cried Theo. "I couldn't have found her if she was dead! We can't find the Called Ones. They're in the Presence! She isn't either dead!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Dead or not dead—what did a day or so matter? My thoughts slumped. She had no water now and even the three of us couldn't hope to move a hillside in time—*Move a hillside! Lift a mountain!*

"Theo!" I clutched his shoulder, and with his startled gasp the light went out. Darkness flooded in around us and suddenly the stars were very bright and very close. "Theo, Jareb said you could lift mountains. Can you? Can you really do that?"

"No," Theo's voice was very small. "Someday I'll be able to, but I'm too young now. Mountains—no, no, I can't. Not yet!"

"Your father—" I pursued desperately, "Could he—"

"Sure," said Theo, unhappily. "Only he doesn't even know where—"

"Theo!" I thought it was a voice, but a voice doesn't start inside you and shake its way out past your bones. "Theo!"

"Father!" Theo's startled eyes were white glints in the starshine—and his arms went up. "Oh, Father! You can—"

Words stopped and Theo leaped into the air and he didn't come down! Jareb and I clutched each other and stared up into the night. Theo hurled himself into a clustered shadow above us, and for a long, unbroken moment, all the world waited and listened with us—to silence.

Then the clustered shadow dissolved and became Theo and a man and a woman and another man. They slanted down to us out of the night sky, but they didn't muddy their feet in the muck at the base of the slide. They didn't have to. They didn't touch the ground. Not quite.

"Your love is behind the slide?" the man asked me quickly.

I recoiled at the bluntness of his words. "No!" I protested. "Yes!" I gasped, giving up my evasions. "Behind the slide!"

"Your pardon," said the man, and Jareb and I were whisked out of the way like children. I don't know how we got to the other side of the creek and up on the shelf halfway up the other side, but we crouched there and watched the loose scree on the slope begin to funnel up like a slow tornado, pebbles grating softly against pebbles as they rose. Light came on the slope, and we could see a hole starting and deepening into the slide. And no dirt caved from above it and no rocks rattled down into it—only the lengthening dark streak rose up from the hillside and up. Then there was a *thunk* and a satisfied murmur from the clustered people over there. The funnel of displaced dirt relaxed itself out of existence against the creek bank farther downstream. I watched the mouth of the hole with my life crushed in my unbreathing chest. *Lazarus!* my thoughts babbled. *Come forth!*

And there she was! There was Gail! Stooping out of the hole, dazed and bewildered, her hair tumbled down over her shoulders and half

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

obscuring her mud-streaked face. One hand steadied her against the edge of the hole—the other was still clutching that bent old lard pail.

I heard the woman cry out something shocked and sorry and saw her draw Gail up into her arms. Then Gail was in *my* arms and Jareb was clutching her skirts and sobbing into them. Gail's shaking hands were clamped onto my arm as she looked back over her shoulder.

"Are they angels?" she asked. "Are they angels?" Then she was warm and heavy against me, clinging and sobbing, and my life started again with a shaken breath.

"Your pardon." The man was back by us. "We must go." And the three clustered tightly but untouching, about us. I had one look of the earth scurrying back, far beneath us and, helpless to react any more, hid my face against Gail's hair. I clutched her to me with one aching arm and held Jareb desperately against my side with the other. Then the thought came out of panic. *We would have fallen long ago if we were going to fall.* But the thought brought no comfort.

"Step," said Theo's father. "Step." And I did—staggering across the front porch of Gail's house.

Quickly we were inside and a dim light filled the fireplace. Gail murmured, and she and the woman disappeared into the other room.

The man drew Theo to him. "Tell me," he said.

In the scurrying silence, I backed toward the fireplace, my hands spreading to gather warmth. There was no warmth, only light. Jareb shivered against me, and I gathered him into the crook of my arm.

Theo began to cry and his father left him to turn to us. He opened his mouth and then closed it. Perhaps he had to talk twice, too, as Jareb had told me Theo had to. Jareb shivered and I shivered, too. The light in the fireplace brightened and warmth began to creep out into the room.

"Theo tells me that he and Jareb took a little girl from her mother—" The voice rang some bell for me. Where had I—?

"Yes," I said, "they took Tally. But didn't you—"

"We knew nothing of it," said Theo's father. "We thought Theo was on one of his—his finding-out journeys. The boys have the child concealed in the waterway between here and the end of the water. Theo says she is suffering from the lack of—good."

"She's dying," I said flatly.

"Dying?" The man's startled face leaned into the light.

"But you—" I groped, "I've seen you—"

"Another time." He cut my stuttering with a motion of his hand. "Shan—" The other man drifted to the door, paused briefly, looking back at Theo's father, then he was gone soundlessly, out into the dark.

The man drew Theo to him again and held him comfortingly as he went on.

"Children—" he began. Theo squirmed.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Children—" I nodded and Jareb stirred in the circle of my arm.

The man smiled. "So you know, too, Mr. Lambert," he said. Then he sobered. "But that doesn't excuse what they have done. Tally's mother must be—"

"She is," I said. "The whole Conclave is. And they're sick, too. That's why they're acting like this—"

"I can't understand." The man frowned, puzzled. "Theo says you offered them—"

"I did," I said. "*They* couldn't understand. That's why—"

"And they'd rather die—" He shook his head.

"That's the way people are," I said. "Surely you've heard of people dying because of misunderstanding."

His face was bleak in the warm light, and I felt such a pang of sorrow from him that my eyes blurred. Then they cleared in a hurry as Gail and the woman came back, Gail, clean and decently dressed, braiding the second of the two long braids of her heavy hair.

"The boys have Tally," she began.

The woman interrupted. "Shan's gone to get her."

"It isn't very far," said Jareb. "We didn't take her very far. Theo said—" his eyes flicked to the man. "Theo said his daddy and mamma didn't know and if they found out, they wouldn't let him—" He broke off, conscious as I was, of the cold feeling of unacceptance that filled the room. For a minute his shoulder pushed against me, then he got mad.

"She was dying!" he shouted. "She was dying!" He lowered his voice, his eyes apprehensively turned toward the door. "Did you want me to just let her die? Her daddy wouldn't let her mamma give her any of the good, and when mamma and I tried to, they were coming to get her. So I went and got Theo and we took her—we went—" his voice faltered. "Maybe she's dead now!" he wailed. "And Sister Ruth feels so bad! We didn't have any dry clothes for her—" There was a movement at the door and Shan came in. I felt a relaxation all around me, and Theo ventured a quick halfsmile at Jareb.

In a flurry of movement, Shan gave up the muddy bundle of rags into the hands of Theo's mother. She and Gail disappeared again into the other room. The indignant cry of a wakened child made us all smile. It was like the ending of a birth-wait.

"She couldn't even cry, before," said Jareb. "She'd open her mouth, but no crying would come out! The good's working already!"

I looked at Shan. He wasn't even wet! How had he managed to go get her without going down into the pond.

"He shielded," Theo was answering me, shamefaced. "I forgot. I could have kept Jareb and me dry if I'd thought, but it was so fast—" He thought he had explained!

Dawn was steel-grey at the window. Tally, full of warm milk spiked with good, was sleeping in Gail's arms. The rest of us were resting our voices and our minds. Only our minds wouldn't rest. We

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

had no solution yet. What were we to do about Tally? If we gave her back to her folks with them feeling as they did about the good, she'd die. If we kept her, her parents' agony would be something we couldn't bear. If we told them that we had her and wouldn't give her back—no telling what the half-crazed batch would do.

Finally Theo's father said, "Your Conclave came here to separate itself from the world to worship the Presence—your God—in the way they felt right."

"Yes," I said, not liking the sound of 'separate,' though it was true.

"Then you feel a nearness to the Presence."

"We hope for it," I answered.

"And when we released Gail from the cave, she asked if we were related to the Presence—"

"Related?" I frowned, trying to think. Gail stirred and lowered her head so that her cheek was pressed to the spiky dampness of Tally's hair.

"I thought they were angels," she said softly. "And they are!"

"Angels?" asked Theo's father.

"Messengers of God," I explained. "They carry out His will in the world."

"Intermediaries?" suggested Theo's father. "Coming between you and the Presence?"

"Not coming between!" I was a little annoyed. It didn't sound right. "Going between!"

"Oh." The man fell silent, then he said, "If an angel of God appeared to Tally's parents and told them to give her the good, would they obey?"

"I—I think so," I said. "If they believed—"

"This is such a roundabout way," said the man, impatiently. "Just because there's not good in the soil here—if only you had chosen a place like Everly—"

"Everly—" I straightened my weary back with astonishment. "So *that's* where I've seen you—at Everly when I went for the garden truck—"

"That's what I tried to tell you," cried Jareb, suddenly rousing. "That's the other end of the water! They came here first, then went away because there wasn't any good here, and they came here in wagons without any wheels. Theo didn't know the words; so he showed them to me inside my head. I want to go there and see some of them wagons. How can wagons go without wheels? Or horses either? In the sky! I want to see—"

"Wagons without wheels!" I turned my eyes up in exasperation. Even in this troubled moment, Jareb had to go on with his foolish fantasies.

"I'm sorry, Jareb," said Mr. Jensus—that's who he was in Everly!—matter-of-factly. "They were all burned, long ago."

"Aw!" Jareb was disappointed.

"Some of us were burned—" began Theo, but his voice stopped in midword. He colored to his eyebrows, and his eyes crept away from his father's face.

"The angel," suggested Mr. Jensus.

"It's Tally's father that needs

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

convincing," said Gail. "But I think he would accept an angel. You don't argue with angels."

"Good," said Mr. Jensus, standing up briskly. "Then I'll go to him and tell him I'm an angel—"

"But," Gail lowered her head again and then lifted it resolutely, "you don't look like an angel."

"Oh?" Mr. Jensus looked down at himself. "I am the same as when you saw me and thought—"

"Yes," said Gail, "because of what you were doing. But if you are going to convince Sister Ruth and Brother Rual, you'll have to look like a real angel—"

"And that is—?" asked Mr. Jensus.

"A long white robe—" Mr. Jensus nodded. "And wings—" "Wings!" Mr. Jensus was startled. "Feathered wings," Gail went on.

"Feathers!" Mr. Jensus' jaw dropped.

"Aven," said Mrs. Jensus chidingly, "you must look through other eyes."

"And a halo," said Gail. "A ring of brightness above your head."

Mr. Jensus turned despairing eyes to his wife. She smiled at him and touched his arm. "I'll do it," she said. "I don't mind."

Well, Gail, handing me the sleeping Tally, blushingly took a white nightgown from the trunk by the fireplace, and Mrs. Jensus put it on in the other room. She came back to us letting down the shining length of her light hair all around her shoulders and her back. She and her husband in some way devised wings, like feathered curves of light, and set a halo glowing above her head. She truly looked like an angel!

"Except," said Gail.

"Except?" asked Mrs. Jensus. Her eyes twinkled. "Not a tail, too!"

"No." Gail smiled. "That's for devils. The shoes." She pointed to the sturdy shoes showing beneath the hem of the gown.

"No shoes?" Mrs. Jensus asked. "What do they wear?"

Well, no one knew, except that they wouldn't wear sturdy shoes.

"Well," said Mrs. Jensus, and the shoes dissolved into light.

She took the sleeping Tally, and a measure of good tied up in a handkerchief. We all moved out onto the front porch and watched her lift herself and Tally into the cool chill of the predawn morning and move off towards Benson's. I stood there, silent. What could you say in the face of all the impossible things that were happening? Then a niggling little thought crept through the awed wonder. Shouldn't she be flapping the wings? Or did angels flap—

"Mamma, I'm hungry," Jareb's voice broke the moment. "I bet Theo is, too."

"Of course," said Gail. "It's almost breakfast time. You men go do the chores while I get breakfast."

I was just coming back into the cabin with the first bucket of milk and Gail had started cracking the second dozen eggs into the skillet when I heard it—I heard Tally crying, "Mamma! Mamma!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

My chest tightened and apprehension ran through my blood like icy water. I yanked the door open. There was Mrs. Jensus, her eyes wide and shocked, clutching a struggling Tally to her crumpled gown.

"They wouldn't take her!" She could hardly make the words. "They said she was—was—dead! She was a—a—ghost. What's a ghost? How could a child be something so evil that she'd frighten her own parents?"

Gail deftly took the screaming Tally, hushed her into sobs and gave her a crust of bread. Tally considered it for a moment as she clutched it in her tear-wet hand. Then she drew a shuddering breath and greedily stuffed all the crust she could into her mouth.

"A ghost is a dead person who—who stays on earth and haunts—" I began.

"But the Dead are received into the Presence!" cried Mrs. Jensus. "Why would they ever want to—"

"Tell us." Mr. Jensus was there, his hands touching hers gently. "Aloud," he added. "For our friends."

"I went," said Mrs. Jensus, her face smoothing out from its uncomprehending shock. "I went to the meeting house. They were all there because one had been Called. They were to commit his castaside to earth."

Gail and I exchanged startled looks. The first death in the Conclave. "Who?" I asked.

Mrs. Jensus hesitated. "Their—their Man of God."

"Brother Helon!" I felt a dissolving. Now that the keystone was gone, what would happen—

"I went in—like an angel," said Mrs. Jensus. "I went to the mother and held out Tally. The father knocked away her reaching hands because a—a person—Dab?" I shut my eyes and nodded dumbly. Of course, Dab! "—Cried 'Ghost, ghost!' and everyone—they—it was—" Mrs. Jensus hid her face against Mr. Jensus.

Theo and Jareb came in with another bucket of milk, and Gail gave me Tally and turned back to the eggs. She knelt to the fireplace and steadied the skillet on the grate as though every day she cooked on red-hot iron with no fire under it. We were all watching her. The smell of cooking eggs had snared our attention, and suddenly starved us all.

"Dab or no Dab," said Gail, "Sister Ruth wouldn't turn from her baby. Brother Rual or no Brother Rual—"

We heard the voice call, breathlessly. We heard the stagger of steps on the porch.

"I want my baby!" Sister Ruth slid slowly to her knees, the door frame supporting her back. "I want Tally!"

Tally surged in my arms toward her mother, her face and hands liberally smeared with wet bread crumbs. Crooning inarticulately, Sister Ruth took the child from me, but had to sag her weight immediately to the floor. "I—I want some of that

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

salt stuff, too!" she gasped. "Look at Tally! *Look at Tally!*" The child was standing alone on shaky little legs. She lurched toward the fireplace and the savory smelling eggs. "Sumpin a-yeat!" she said, collapsing on hands and knees against Gail, "Sumpin a-yeat!"

Then, as if that wasn't enough, the door was darkened again. There stood Brother Rual, wavering on spread legs, his black scowl on his pallid face.

"I want my woman!" he said, trying to moisten his dry lips. "And my child! And to hell with that damn Dab!"

I choked back a massive shout of laughter as the whole insane affair climaxed in Jareb's shrill, shocked, "Ah—M-m-m! Mamma! He cussed! He cussed!"

We all went to Everly—Shan and the two boys going back by the waterway—the rest of us openly in the light wagon, with only the fewest possessions possible. With no need for discussion, our doors had closed unopenably on the Conclave. We drove slowly by the meeting house, and Gail clutched my arm as we saw the bare rectangle of grassless soil marking where Brother Helon's body lay. The flat scar on the land was waiting for the grass to heal it and to erase Brother Helon from this world.

As we pulled up the rise to the Everly road, I saw the roadside brush jerk and shake and be still suddenly. I leaned back and reached down into the wagon, lifting my eyebrows at Mr. Jensus. He nodded and put into my hand the bundle of good Mrs. Jensus had carried. I tossed it into the grass by the road. As our wheels ground gravel turning the corner above Hellesgate, I looked back. Dab was crouched in the road looking after us, the good clutched his hand. He was fumbling at the string as we rounded the corner. I wondered. Was he going to taste it—or dump it out on the ground.

Arriving at Everly was like coming home. We weren't among strangers—only friends too considerate to gather around in droves, but we could feel their warmth and support all around us. I don't know why I knew we couldn't stay, but I did. But stay or not, it was wonderful just to relax for a while—only that Dab-worry was still nagging at me.

The day after our arrival, Theo was showing us around their place. It was new to everyone but me—and most of it was new to me, too. I had only seen the part where I picked up the garden truck for Hellesgate.

"The pump's over here," said Jareb. "Only it's—it's," he paused a moment, then grinned. "It's busted!"

"Pump trouble?" I asked Mr. Jensus.

"Yes," he said. "It works for a while and then it stops. It's a type we don't know. We're trying to analyze the difficulty—"

"I've worked on pumps," I said. "Want me to take a look?"

"Take a look?" He paused and then smiled. "If you would, please, take a look."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It was a simple matter to fix. It made me wonder that they couldn't have told right off what was the matter. I didn't say anything and went ahead and fixed it. I put it in gear and watched the blades of the windmill bite the wind. I watched with satisfaction the gush of the waters—then I blinked and looked again. The water was being pumped *into* the hill! It leaped out of the well pipe, twisted in the sun and disappeared into a crack in the hill!

Mr. Jensus caught my questioning. "It's the creek," he nodded. "It hasn't rained for a long time. We can't let the creek run dry."

"The creek?" I blinked, my mind churning. "Yeah, Jareb said you made—"

Mr. Jensus' face saddened. "I'll have to speak to Theo again about talking unwisely outside the Group," he said. "That is strictly Group business."

"You keep the creek flowing?" Then I frowned a little. "But why? None of you live down there—"

"But you do," he smiled. "You need water. We can provide it; so of course, we do."

"Oh, of course," I repeated. It sounded too simple. Why should— Then another thought caught me. "Then this *is* the other end of the water!"

"Well, yes," said Mr. Jensus after the usual pause. "You could say that."

"Theo told Jareb," I said. "He said that's where you lived."

"Theo enjoys flowing with the water on warm days. He's forbidden to go farther than the pool."

"But if he hadn't—" I said.

"If he hadn't," nodded Mr. Jensus. "But he disobeyed."

From the tone of his voice I decided maybe Theo wasn't getting away with very much with his dad.

"Then the broken pump is why the creek has been drying up lately?"

"Yes," said Mr. Jensus. "We try to have someone here to keep the water flowing, but sometimes—"

"Keep the water flowing without the pump?" I asked. Mr. Jensus nodded.

"Look here," I said, a kind of dizziness roaring in my ears. "I'm going to ask you something flat-out. I want a flat-out answer. Who *are* you people, anyway?"

"We?" Mr. Jensus' eyebrows rose. "We're The People." His hand went out at my sudden scowl. "No, please. I'm not trying to—to mock you. We have no name for ourselves except The People. We, like you, seek a new home. We can never go back—"

"Back where?" I asked flatly.

"Back Home." His lips lifted in a half smile. "We had no other name for it either."

"Then you're from across the sea—"

"The sea?" His voice was a sigh.

"The sea," I said, remembering it as last I had seen it so long ago.

"Oh, the sea!" His face brightened. "Then you do have wide waters in this world too—"

"This world?" I felt a clenching in my chest.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yes," It was more a sigh than a word. "We had a crossing—but not of the sea—"

And for the second time I was snatched into that bright stream. The hills and flats were gone for me. The pump and the glittering water faded into dark. I watched a world die in the sky, flame licking like tongues as far as across a whole hemisphere. I saw vehicles rise before the flames and lose themselves in the darkness of space. I felt madness crisp the edges of my mind as I tried to find a solid something in a dissolving nothing. Then the pump coughed and caught and again spewed the steady stream into the hillside.

Mr. Jensus' eyes were warily on mine.

"Another world," I said. "Wagons without wheels—"

Mr. Jensus nodded. "And some burned up in the atmosphere when we came to this world. And some of us died here because of un-understanding—" His voice wavered and, for a minute, I looked at Everly through his eyes—the eyes of a refugee who knew the gates of Eden were forever slammed behind him and that the turning sword of flame of burning craft forever stood guard. I blinked myself back to myself.

"I don't understand," I said. "Not only what you have just told me, but why you go on helping—"

He frowned a little. "Surely none of the facts cancel any others. It wasn't Hellesgate that—that killed. Hellesgate needs water, so—"

"Of course," I said, "I guess—" Then all at once I wanted to hold my hand out to him and as quickly knew I didn't have to. I knew we were touching for a small moment somewhere where it mattered most. I cleared my throat and kicked at the base of the hill. The dust sifted across my toe—

"Say!" I said, turning with relief to the dust again. "The good—where do you get it?"

"From this hill," said Mr. Jensus. "There is more of it here than elsewhere. It takes many buckets of the hill to yield a very small amount of good. But it takes a very, very small amount of good to—to set right the un-goodness."

"I wonder what happened that Hellesgate doesn't have it," I said.

"I do not know your world well," said Mr. Jensus. "But I think good must be almost everywhere. There must be very few places where good is not. Otherwise you would know of it and how to put good where it is not."

"Put good—" I stared at the water. I swallowed. "If good could get into the soil—"

"Then it would feed into the water and into the plants, and there would be no need to add—" His words died. "Yes," he said slowly. "Of course!" he cried. "As you think! As you think!"

And before nightfall the pump was repositioned so that the gush of water cut through the edge of the hill before plunging out of sight. The creek ran good and muddy down to Hellesgate! And good soaked into the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

soil along every irrigation ditch and in every field and swirled roily in every cup of drinking water—and I hope it gritted between Dab's teeth every time he drank! I could hear him cuss! But try throwing *that*, good out!

Well, that was all long ago and far away. We left Everly, as we knew we had to. We never saw Hellesgate again. But we heard of it—of the demons that possessed it at first and of the brave, holy war waged against them until they were banished. And how the evil spells were lifted then, and the Gates of Hell did not prevail against the Second Conclave. That's why the town is called Hellesgate. Brother Jonadab says so and he should know! Only one as strong and holy as the leader of the Second Conclave could have cast out the demons and removed the evil from the land, and he, Brother Jonadab, was the only one who dared pursue the demons as they finally fled!

And the other people—The People. I know they are sometimes around. I know it when, in a rare, wonderful moment, I have a feeling that I am touching someone somewhere where it matters and I know what that boy meant when he said words aren't always necessary and for a blessed moment, my heart just—lifts up and goes along.

IMPORTANT NOTICE TO SUBSCRIBERS ON THE MOVE

Will you put yourself in the place of a copy of F&SF for a moment? A copy that is mailed to your home, only to find that you have moved. Is it forwarded to you? *No.* Is it returned to us? *No.* Instead, a post office regulation decrees that it must be. . .thrown away! We are notified of this grim procedure and charged ten cents for each notification. Multiply this aimless ending by hundreds each month and we have a doubly sad story: copies that do nobody any good, and a considerable waste of money to us, money which we would much prefer to spend on new stories. With your help, this situation can be changed. *If you are planning a change of address, please notify us six weeks in advance. If possible, enclose a label from a recent issue, and be sure to give us both your old and new address, including the zip codes.*

SUBSCRIPTION SERVICE, MERCURY PRESS, Inc., P. O. Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

F&SF Competition # 1

The useful gadget described below is not made from swords and is, in fact, an authentic United States patent. If you'd like a copy of the complete specifications, just send 50¢ and the patent number to the U. S. Patent Office, Washington, D. C. We offer it as a point of departure for F&SF Competition # 1, in which we ask readers to send us a description of any original absolutely mad invention. Less than 200 words, please; drawings optional.

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by December 1. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

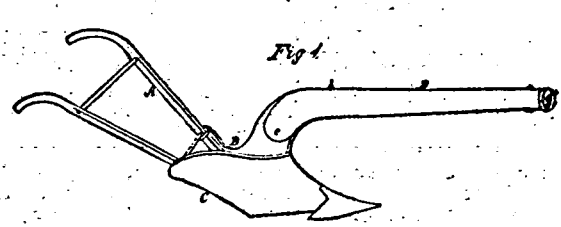
Prizes: First prize winner will receive an original F&SF cover painting. Second prize will receive THE SCIENCE FICTION HALL OF FAME, (Doubleday). Runners-up will receive one-year subscriptions to F&SF. Results of Competition 1 will appear in the March issue.

Combined plow and gun

Specifications forming part of Letters Patent No. 35,600, June 17, 1862

The object of our invention is to produce a plow equal, if not superior, to that implement as ordinarily made, and at the same time to combine in its construction the elements of light ordnance, so that when the occasion offers it may do valuable service in the capacity of both implements.

It is symmetrical and pleasing to the eye. As a piece of light ordnance its capacity may vary from a projectile of one to three pounds weight without rendering it cumbersome as a plow. Its utility as an implement of the twofold capacity described is unquestionable, especially when used in border localities, subject to savage feuds and guerrilla warfare. As a means of defense in repelling surprises and skirmishing attacks on those engaged in a peaceful avocation it is unrivaled, as it can be immediately brought into action by disengaging the team, and in times of danger may be used in the field, ready charged with its deadly missiles of ball or grape. The share serves to anchor it firmly in the ground and enables it to resist the recoil, while the hand-levers A furnish convenient means of giving it the proper direction.



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fantasy and Science Fiction
MARKET PLACE

BOOKS-MAGAZINES

SCIENTIFANTASY specialist: Books, magazines. Free catalog. Gerry de la Ree, 7 Cedarwood, Saddle River, N.J. 07458.

ONE issue of P.S. Magazine for $.75. Humor and nostalgia by Jean Shepherd, Nat Hentoff, Issac Asimov, Alfred Bester, William Tenn, others. Mercury, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753.

SPECIALISTS: Science Fiction, Fantasy, Weird Fiction. Books, Pocketbooks. Lists issued. Stephen's Book Service, Post Office Box 321, Kings Park, L.I., New York 11754.

30,000 magazines for sale, science fiction, western, detective, adventure, others. We buy collections, too. Send list, enclosing stamp. Magazine Center, Box 214, Little Rock, Ark. 72203.

SF-FANTASY books (hardcover), mysteries, westerns. Scarce and OP titles. Free lists. Aspen Bookhouse, RD 1, Freeville, N.Y. 13068.

SF—Fantasy Books for sale. Gordon Barber, 35 Minneapolis Ave., Duluth, Minn. 55803.

LOVECRAFT, Clark Ashton Smith, Robert E. Howard and many others are discussed in 41-page article about famous pulp magazine Weird Tales in 1930's. Price: one dollar. Reginald Smith, 1509 Mar-Les, Santa Ana, Calif. 92706.

TRADE? Send four science fiction paperbacks plus two dollars. Receive seven science fiction books. William Palmer, 11505 Northeast Prescott, Portland, Oregon 97220.

SF PULP MAGAZINES for sale. Many rare items. Write for catalogue. SPACE AGE BOOKS, Box 1267L, G.P.O., Melbourne, 3001, Victoria, AUSTRALIA.

70 page catalog Arkham Fantasy Burroughs, Mirage Press Science Fiction pulp, paperbacks, comics. Send 50¢ Passaic Book Center, 594 Main Avenue, Passaic, N.J. 07055.

SF-Fantasy magazines, books, paperbacks. List free. Collections also purchased. Robert Madle, 4406 Bestor Drive, Rockville, Md. 10853.

AUTHORS-SERVICES

Manuscripts wanted. Horror-macabre. Serious pieces only. New quarterly with direction and purpose. Will return solicited pieces. No pay—yet. Will notify those considered. Aurora Publications, P. O. Box 13106, Tampa, Fla. 33611.

COINS

BRILLIANT uncirculated silver dollars $5.00 each. Send $24.00 for 5 different dates. Five different dates Indian Head pennies $2.00. J. Dean Coins, 1525 East Isaacs, Walla Walla, Washington 99362.

CHESS

3D-Chess Rules $2. Club $2/yr. Boards $10: and $20. U.S., Canada 3-D Chess Club, 506 E 14th Street, Bloomington, Ind. 47401.

STAMPS

OXO. Send $1.00 American or Canadian for 50 different Australian stamps. Price includes return air postage. Dealers prices on application. Any confidential Australian type enquiries welcomed. Running Investments Syndicate, P.O. Box 607, Canberra City, Canberra, A.C.T., Australia, 2600.

100 Different exciting foreign stamps-10¢. Attractive Bargain Approvals. Free Bonus Plan! K. Feldman, Box 651, Chatsworth, Calif. 91311.

Send $2.00 American or Canadian for 100 different Swedish stamps, also high values, post free by air mail. Your satisfaction is guaranteed! Mr. Martti Hyytiainen, Bagaregardsgatan 11 B, S-41670 Goteborg, Sweden.

Do you have something to advertise to sf readers? Books, magazines, typewriters, telescopes, computers, space-drives, or misc. Use the F&SF Market Place at these low, low rates: $3.00 for minimum of ten (10) words, plus 30¢ for each additional word. Send copy and remittance to: Adv. Dept., Fantasy and Science Fiction, P.O. Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MONEY MAKING OPPORTUNITIES

FREE Information getting Information! Make Money! Box 1807, Madison, Wisc. 53701.

HYPNOTISM

LEARN WHILE ASLEEP. Hypnotize with your recorder, phonograph. Astonishing details, sensational catalog free. Sleep-learning Research Association, Box 24-FS, Olympia, Washington, 98502.

Hypnotism Revealed. Free Illustrated Details. Powers, 12015 Sherman Road, North Hollywood, California 91605.

FREE Hypnotism, Self-Hypnosis. Sleep learning Catalog! Drawer G-400, Ruidoso, New Mexico 88345.

PERSONAL

WITHCRAFT, VOODOO HEAD-QUARTERS. Spells Galore! Occult Correspondence Club. Catalog, 25¢ Cauldron, Box 403-FSF, Rego Park, N.Y. 11374.

Happiness, Love, Success, numberscope plus number for 1971, $4.00. Print name, birthdate, address to: Your Key, Box 76113, Los Angeles, Calif. 90005.

Psychic, noted ESP specialist will answer 3 questions on personal problems for $10.00. Milton Kramer, 4539 W. Howard St., Skokie, Illinois 60076.

Your future told. Card readings. Asmani-Amirabad—Kuche Majd 1-58—Tehran—Iran. $4, check only, brings personal reading in full.

PSORIASIS SUFFERERS: DISCOURAGED? Write for Free important information that is helping thousands! PIXACOL, Box 38-FF, Avon Lake, Ohio 44012.

Birth chart handsomely inked on parchment paper, suitable for framing; and thorough delineation of natal influences. Send birthdate, time, place. $12.50. James Marshall, Box 992, Weaverville, Calif. 96093.

MISCELLANEOUS

ESP LABORATORY. This new research/service group can help you. For FREE information write: Al G. Manning, ESP Laboratory, 7559 Santa Monica Blvd., Los Angeles, Calif. 90046.

Ignorance evolves, Intelligence ADVOLVES. $1.00 buys ADVOLVE—word game won by shrewdly changing original, progeny, into survivable forms, partial information about pattern determining characteristics of which is revealed each changing opportunity. Hartman's, Earlham, Iowa 50072.

FOREIGN EDITIONS of Fantasy and Science Fiction. A few copies of French, German, Italian, Portuguese and British editions available at 75¢ each; three for $2.00. Mercury Press, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753.

OCCULT

INNER SPACE. The Magazine of the Psychic and Occult, featuring interviews with Isaac Bashevis Singer and Isaac Asimov, Hollywood and the Occult, How to Consult a Medium, and more. Send $1.00 to MERCURY PRESS, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753.

YOUR MARKET PLACE

A market is people—alert, intelligent, active people.

Here you can reach 180,000 people (averaging three readers per copy—60,000 paid circulation). Many of them are enthusiastic hobbyists—collecting books, magazines, stamps, coins, model rockets, etc.—actively interested in photography, music, astronomy, painting, sculpture, electronics.

If you have a product or service of merit, tell them about it. The price is right: $3.00 for a minimum of ten (10) words, plus 30¢ for each additional word. To keep the rate this low, we must request remittance with the order.

Post office box and number count as two words. No charge for zip code.

Fantasy & Science Fiction, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED